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The Phantom Spy ;

OR,

The Pilot of the Prairie.

BY BUFFALO BILL,
AUTHOR OF "DEADLY EYE," "THE PRAIRIE
ROVER," "KANSAS KING," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PHANTOM SPY.

"DEVILS alive! is the man mad?"

"I guess not; Prairie Pilot ain't no man to go mad; he sees somethin' as he's goin' to run down."

"You bet! The Pilot's on a trail; but what in tarnation is it?"

As the third speaker spoke, there suddenly dashed out of the shadow of the timber into the broad moonlight, a horseman, who, with a deep-toned "hoop-la!" urged his steed into a full run out upon the rolling prairie, which spread for miles in his front.

The three speakers had been seated around a camp-fire, in the shelter of a *motte*, or "timber island," far out on the Western plains.

Their comrade, who had suddenly caused them to spring to their feet, and give vent to the conversation which opens this chapter, had been pacing to and fro in moody silence, a few yards from the fire, like a sentinel on guard, and at every turn in his walk he would hesitate momentarily, and glance far out over the moonlit prairie, as if on the alert for approaching danger.

Suddenly, with a half-cry, as though of alarm, he had bounded toward where stood his steed, ready saddled, and the next moment, without a word to his companions, had shot forth upon the prairie like an arrow from the bow.

"Ho, fellers! better git onto yer pins, for there's somethin' in the wind when yer see Prairie Pilot strike a trail like that," cried Yankee Sam, who, with his two companions, Bravo Bob and Scalp-lock Dave, had been quietly smoking around the camp-fire, and telling stories of desperate adventure they had known in their wild and reckless lives.

At the call of Yankee Sam a score of men sprung to their feet and grasped their fire-arms, and instantly the encampment was a scene of excitement.

"Well, I'm after the Pilot, for he sha'n't play a lone hand if there's any danger ahead," and Bravo Bob started for his horse, when a loud

cry from Scalp-lock Dave caused him to come to a sudden halt.

"Holy Halifax! look a-yonder!"

Every eye was turned out upon the prairie, and like one voice a dozen exclaimed:

"The Phantom Spy!"

Far out upon the prairie, and plainly visible in the moonlight, was what appeared to be a specter horse and rider, for the steed was as white as snow, and with a long flowing mane and tail.

The rider on his back was dressed in the loose robe of a woman, for it fluttered only upon one side of the animal, as he sped along swiftly over the prairie.

A long white vail floated far out behind, and apparently encircled the rider's head like a turban, while motionless in the saddle, if saddle there was on the horse, she seemed to urge her steed on by a mere exertion of her will.

Behind the phantom-looking horse and rider, and some hundred lengths away, rode the man whom his comrades called Prairie Pilot, and who had so suddenly dashed from the timber.

That he was urging his horse to the utmost, was evident; and, though mounted upon the swiftest steed on the plains, that he was not gaining upon the phantom horse and rider was also evident.



"THEN HEED MY WARNING. FAREWELL!"

For an instant the pursuer and pursued were visible to every eye in the encampment; then they disappeared from view over a roll in the prairie.

At their disappearance a sigh of relief seemed to come from scouts, traders and teamsters alike, for weird stories were told of the Phantom Spy, the white horse and rider, which, when once found on the trail of a wagon-train, was certain to bring bloodshed and ruin upon it before it reached the destination for which it was moving.

All in that train had heard of the Phantom Spy, and all felt a superstitious awe at the mere mention of the name.

Only the night before, around the camp-fire, the weird steed and rider had been the subject of conversation, and Prairie Pilot, the chief guide and scout of the traders' train, wending its way toward the frontier settlements had declared that he would follow the Phantom to the bitter end.

All knew Prairie Pilot to be one of the most daring scouts on the plains, and they felt that he would keep his word if he went to his own death in the attempt to solve the mystery.

"I guess as how you'll let the Pilot play a lone hand now, Bravo Bob?" said Scalp-lock Dave, as the young man paused, when the Phantom Spy was discovered to be the game of the man who had won the *sobriquet* of Prairie Pilot, on account of his perfect knowledge of the prairies and mountains of the West.

"I thought you knew me better than that, Dave," said the young man, whose reckless nature had caused his companions to dub him Bravo Bob, for there were few things that the handsome and youthful scout dare not do.

A moment after Bravo Bob also dashed out upon the trail of the Prairie Pilot and the Phantom Spy.

"Wal, them as want ter kin go a-trailin' arter sperets and spooks; but, as for Dave Dorsey, he wants to save the leetle ha'r he has," and Scalp-lock Dave tenderly ran his fingers through the bunch of hair growing upon the top of his head, looking like an island in a lake, with the rest of his skull perfectly bald.

"I'm with yer, pard; I ain't no hunter for ghosties, and I ain't lost no spook nor speret, so I ain't a-lookin' fer none."

"The Pilot hired us for hunters across the plains, an' it's our dooty to stand by this heur train 'till it gits whar it's a-goin'; so as the Pilot and Bob's off on the trail of a speret gal, why, we's jist got to do double dooty, an' I'm of opinion we'd better set a watch an' turn in."

This opinion of Yankee Sam seemed to meet with general assent from the traders and teamsters, and after a guard was set, they all returned to their blankets; yet, strive as they would, their dreams would turn upon the two daring men who had gone forth in pursuit of the Phantom Spy.

CHAPTER II.

RUN DOWN.

LIKE the very wind the Phantom Spy and the Prairie Pilot were borne over the prairie by their fleet steeds, the pursued steadily gaining upon the pursuer.

"Come, Racer, you must mend your pace, or yonder fleet animal will run you out of sight," cried Prairie Pilot, and encouraged by his master's voice, the noble steed bounded forward with renewed exertion, and steadily began to gain upon the phantom horse and rider.

Presently the white form turned and glanced behind, as though hearing the nearer approach of the pursuer, and at once a ghostly-looking arm was seen to rise and fall in quick succession several times, and the sound of a sharp blow each time reached the ears of Prairie Pilot, who exclaimed:

"They are human, Racer, and you are driving the Phantom hard. On, on, old fellow, and we will yet solve the mystery!"

With tremendous exertions both steeds then rushed on, at an almost incredible pace, and Bravo Bob, nearly a mile in their rear, felt that he was being distanced, although his horse was remarkably swift and possessed good bottom.

In vain did the flying, snow-white steed strain every muscle; sharp and quick fell the blows of the whip to urge him on; but to no avail, for Racer's blood was up, and the cruel spur was kept constantly urging him on. The Prairie Pilot felt that the game was in his own hands, and a gleam of pleasure flashed in his dark eyes, for he felt that he was about to solve the mystery of that so-called phantom horse and rider, which, for three years, had eluded all pursuit, and had become a terror upon the prairies.

Who or what it could be, none knew; but certain it was, that when a party of scouts, or hunters, a wagon-train, or settlement on the border, beheld the weird horse and rider, ruin and bloodshed were sure to follow, until the apparition had been called the Phantom Spy, ever dogging the steps of those where booty was to be gained.

Regarding the strange steed and rider, the Prairie Pilot had had his own views, which he kept to himself, and twice before he had seen and chased the apparition, but without result in his favor, as he was not then mounted upon his matchless Racer, the fleetest steed on the plains.

Now it was different, for Racer was in superb condition, and he determined to overtake the fugitive if he drove his own noble animal to death.

True, he could have ended the chase sooner, perhaps, by resorting to his rifle; but he would not fire upon a woman. No, he must depend upon Racer.

And nobly did the fleet animal respond to his master's urging, and foot by foot drew nearer the chase, until only a score of lengths separated them.

Then, suddenly, the white steed went down, and his rider was thrown thirty feet in front, and lay white and motionless, as though dead, while the animal sprung nimbly to his feet, unhurt by his fall on the soft prairie sward.

With an iron hand Prairie Pilot drew Racer back upon his haunches, and springing to the ground, rushed to the side of the fallen rider.

"Yes, it is a woman—nay, a mere girl. I hope she is not dead," he cried, earnestly, at the same time laying his hand over her breast.

"No, she is merely stunned; I can soon revive her," and unslinging his canteen from his saddle, he began to bathe her face and hands, at the same time gazing in admiration upon her.

"How beautiful she is, and scarcely over sixteen! Who can she be?"

Indeed she was beautiful, with her wealth of brown hair, and graceful, delicate form, clad in a robe of pure white, worn loose and flowing, as if the better to keep up the weird character she played.

The face was lovely, bronzed by exposure, and every feature perfect, while the eyelids were fringed with the longest dark lashes; the feet were small, and incased in white canvas boots; upon her tiny hands she wore buck-skin gloves, and her head was encircled by a white veil of lightest material.

A moment or two Prairie Pilot rubbed her hands briskly, and bathed her face; then the eyes slowly opened and rested with a stare upon the man who bent over her.

"You have run me down, sir, at last," she said, in a stern voice for a girl, and in a tone of sarcasm.

"I regret your fall, miss. I hope you are not hurt," replied Prairie Pilot, politely.

"I was merely stunned—ha! there is Specter, and unhurt," and rising quickly, she called to her steed, which, with a low neigh, trotted to her side.

Gently she patted the faithful animal, and then abruptly turning to the man before her, she said:

"Who are you, sir?"

"Men call me the Prairie Pilot," quietly responded the scout.

The girl started, her face flushed in the bright moonlight, and her lustrous, dark-blue eyes turned full upon her captor, and there was admiration in the glance, for he was six feet tall, as straight as a lance, and with a form denoting great strength and activity, while his every motion was graceful.

He was clad in a handsome suit of dressed buck-skin, skillfully worked with beads and quills; his fringed leggings were stuck in the tops of cavalry boots, the heels of which were armed with huge silver spurs of the Mexican pattern.

His face was shaded by a broad sombrero, encircled by a silver cord, and a heavy, silken beard, of dark brown, concealed his lower features and fell down to his belt; but the face was exceedingly handsome—the brow broad and high, and the eyes bright, full of intense feeling, and fearless, while the expressions resting thereon were courage and stern determination.

His hair, the same color as his beard, was wavy, and hung far down his back, giving him a rather dashing appearance.

A repeating rifle hung at his back, and in his belt were three revolvers and a large bowie-knife.

From the handsome man before her, the maiden's eyes turned upon the splendid animal,

quietly cropping the short prairie grass, and patiently awaiting his master. A finer steed she never saw, with his long, gaunt body, muscular limbs, glossy black hide, arching neck and small head.

Brightly glittered the moonlight upon the silver-bespangled Mexican saddle and bridle, and the young girl observed that the rifle, revolvers and knife of the scout were mounted with the same precious metal.

Often before she had heard of the Prairie Pilot, a man who had passed half a score of years upon the border, and coming from none knew where.

His name none knew, other than that men called him Prairie Pilot, scout, guide, and hunter, and in an encounter those who knew him shunned him.

"I have heard of the man they call Prairie Pilot. I feel my capture less keenly, when I know who it is that has taken me," said the young girl, after a quick but careful scrutiny of horse and rider.

"You are complimentary, miss; but may I ask who is my fair prisoner?"

"Like yourself, I have a name given me on the plains; I am called the Phantom Spy."

"That I knew. It was to solve the mystery of your masquerade I followed you."

"And now that you have run me down, what is your intention regarding me?"

"To release you, upon one condition—"

"And that is—?"

"I have noticed that after you are discovered upon the trail of a train, a band of robbers, under the lead of the Hermit Chief, invariably make an attack: *are you their spy?*"

"You had a condition, I believe, for my release," evasively replied the girl.

"Yes; promise me that you will not report the train from which I chased you, and you shall go free."

"If I refuse to promise—what then?"

"I will see that you do not, by retaining you as a prisoner."

"I will promise you in good faith."

"Very well. Can I aid you to mount?"

"No," and with a bound the girl was on the back of her steed, when she continued:

"I thank you, Prairie Pilot, and before I go I would give you a word of warning: keep away from yonder range of hills, for men live there who seek your life."

"I know it; there dwells the Hermit Chief and his band."

"Then heed my warning. Farewell."

With a word to her steed, the animal bounded away, heading in the direction of a range of hills, some six miles distant, and behind which the moon was slowly sinking from sight, and leaving the prairie in gloom and darkness, with the Prairie Pilot standing erect and motionless, gazing after the rapidly-receding form of the weird-looking horse and rider.

CHAPTER III.

BRAVO BOB'S ADVENTURE.

WHEN morning broke over the prairie the encampment was astir, and Yankee Sam eagerly scanned the landscape for some sign of Prairie Pilot or Bravo Bob.

But, nothing was visible, far or near, and preparations for breakfast were carried briskly on, for it was the intention of the traders to push rapidly ahead under the guidance of Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave, though they greatly regretted the absence of Prairie Pilot and his right-hand man, Bravo Bob.

Suddenly Scalp-lock Dave uttered a cry of pleasure, and over a roll of the prairie were visible two horsemen approaching the *motte* at a rapid gallop.

"The Pilot and Bob," cried several voices.

"Hold on, fellows; you is only half right. Yes, yonder comes Bravo Bob, but it ain't the Pilot with him, but another feller; an' he's a prizner, too, or my name ain't Sam Sloan."

The truth of Yankee Sam's remark was at once evident, for one of the riders was recognized now by all as Bravo Bob, while the other was a much smaller man than the Pilot, and had a short black beard, while his hands seemed tied behind him, and his horse was led by the scout.

A few moments more and the two horsemen darted up and were welcomed with a loud shout, to which Bravo Bob responded with a wild war-whoop that made the echoes ring through the timber.

"Well, ole hoss, what hev ye to tell us?" cried Scalp-lock Dave, eagerly.

"Considerable, comrades; but first, take this robber and tie him to yonder tree, until we have time to sit on his case," and then changing his

manner into the frontier way of speaking, which he often used, Bravo Bob continued:

"Yer see, I follered close onto the trail of the Phantom and the Pilot—as close as I c'd; but the'r hosses fairly flew, an' I was left a long way behind; but I prest the trail hard, and arter an hour came up with traces of a tumble, so I got down an' s'arched the ground, and bless yer, I see'd whar the Phantom's hoss had pitched into a prairie-dog hole, and tossed his rider a long way ahead.

"Wall, here is whar the Pilot overhauled the Phantom, for ther' was marks all round, and then the trail of the white hoss branched off toward the hills, and arter considerable trouble I found whar the Pilot had circled round and ag'in struck the Phantom's trail, and followed it.

"Wall, I prest on, too, an' arter a while the moon went down an' I couldn't see the trail, but I went on, an' suddenly heard a pistol-shot, an' then another, an' then one of the Pilot's war-cries.

"Then, you bet, I made ole Iron Heart git over the grass, an' I was a-dashin' inter the timber, when I run inter that thar varmint ag'in the tree.

"Wall, we clinched, an' arter a tumble to ther ground an' a long tussle, I choked him still, an' tied him; then I caught his hoss an' waited fer him to come to his senses.

"I hadn't long to wait, an' by some pointed argument, with my bowie, I got out of ther feller that the Pilot had gone on inter the hills, with more company than he wanted jist then.

"So I concluded to jest make this feller come back to camp with me, an' when day broke I recognized him as the very devil who kilt Abe Homer two years ago, an' was sentenced to be hung, but got away; but he can't git away now," and Bravo Bob spoke with bitter determination.

"Does yer b'lieve the Pilot's passed in his checks, Bob?" asked Yankee Sam, very seriously.

"I don't know what to think; but I'm goin' to find out."

"How so, pard?"

"Why, as soon as we try and hang yonder villain, you had better press on with the train to the posts. I am going to return to the hills and look up the Pilot."

"It's mighty risky, Bob."

"Yes, but Prairie Pilot would do the same for me, or you, or any one in need of help. I'm goin', boys, if I go under."

"Wall, I know yer, Bob, so I won't argue to turn yer back from yer purpus; but I hates to see yer go alone," said Yankee Sam.

"An' so does I, pard," put in Scalp-lock Dave.

"Anyhow," he continued, "we'll run ther train on to ther posts, an' ef yer don't put in an appearance soon arter, we'll return with some boys an' look yer up, or git some ha'r."

"Thank you, my friends," replied Bravo Bob, again resuming his natural way of speaking; "thank you. Now let us to work and try this fellow, whom I recognize as the murderer of Abe Homer—"

"And I as one of the band of the Hermit Chief, who two years ago attacked a train I was driving in, and plundered it, after killing a dozen good fellows and wounding me; but I got away from the devils," said a tall teamster, approaching, whip in hand.

All eyes were at once turned upon the prisoner, whose face was the index of his evil heart, and at once it was decided that he should be hung, and that immediately.

In vain was it that Bravo Bob questioned the robber, regarding the fate of Prairie Pilot, and of the whereabouts of his band; he would answer nothing—only beg piteously for his life.

But he begged for mercy to those who felt no mercy, for the band of the Hermit Chief had for years been the terror of the border, and they were determined to make an example of the prisoner then in their power.

Amid the piteous cries of the doomed wretch a rope was quickly throw over the limb of a tree, and the noose fitted around the neck of the struggling wretch.

"Hoist him up!" was the stern order from Bravo Bob, and a dozen men, who held the other end of the rope, quickly drew him into the air.

The end of the rope was then made fast, and quickly the train was in motion, filing out across the prairie, and leaving the timber-island alone with its ghastly spectacle.

A short distance from the *motte* Bravo Bob bade his companions farewell, and, amid a shower of good wishes for luck, branched off alone upon the trail of the Prairie Pilot.

CHAPTER IV.

A PRISONER.

WHEN Prairie Pilot saw the young girl disappear in the distance, he quickly mounted Racer and moved off at a rapid gallop toward the range of hills.

After a ride of some moments he changed his course, going parallel with the hills for some distance, and riding slowly, while he cautiously scanned the ground by the lingering light of the moon.

Then he came to a halt, dismounted, and said, in a low tone:

"Down! Racer!"

Instantly the intelligent animal dropped upon the ground and lay flat upon his side the scout also throwing himself at full length upon the prairie.

Not long had he been in his recumbent position when there was heard the sound of hoof-strokes, and soon after the white horse and fair rider appeared in sight, riding in an easy canter toward the hills.

Without observing the scout and his horse, the maiden passed by within thirty yards of them, when a neigh from Specter caused her to quicken her pace, as though her flight and capture had made her nervous of danger.

Hardly had she been lost sight of in the gloom when a word from Prairie Pilot brought Racer again upon his feet, and, mounting in haste, he set out on the trail of the strange girl.

Keeping the white form just in sight, and knowing that he was invisible to her, in his dark clothes, Prairie Pilot continued on until the darkness grew deeper and deeper as they drew nearer the shadow of the hills, which now loomed boldly up, not half a mile distant.

As though perfectly acquainted with the surroundings, the maiden directed her course to the left, toward a bold and rugged hill, which terminated so abruptly upon the prairie that it formed a cliff.

Around the base of this precipitous hill the ghostly horse and rider wound, and were lost to the sight of the scout.

"It is certain that I cannot follow her further to-night, without making my presence known, so I had better go into camp in the foot-hills until the morning, and then strike her trail, for I am determined to track out this den of robbers."

So saying, the scout rode in under the shadow of the hill, and finding a suitable and secluded gulch in which to camp, he dismounted, and leaving the faithful Racer standing patiently awaiting, he moved around cautiously in search of some dried brush, for he was determined to have a warm supper after his hard ride.

He succeeded in finding some dry sticks, and had just kindled a small blaze, when there came a whirr through the air, a blow upon his head, and he was hurled backward several paces, his arms pinioned to his side by the noose of a lasso.

Though thus taken at a disadvantage, Prairie Pilot managed to get his hand upon his revolver, and a tall form rushing toward him, fell dead, shot through the heart by the scout.

But before he could free himself from the noose, strong as he was, there flashed forth two shots from the dark underbrush, and Prairie Pilot staggered back and fell his full length upon the ground, while with discordant yells half a dozen dark forms bounded out from the covert that had concealed them.

Their sudden rush startled Racer, who, doubtless seeing that he could render his master no service, turned quickly, and with a wild neigh dashed away in the direction in which he had come.

But the scout had not been killed by the shot, only stunned momentarily, by the bullet grazing his temple, and as his assailants rushed upon him, they found that they had caught a Tartar, and only by their united strength, and by a most desperate struggle, were they enabled to securely bind their formidable prisoner.

The fire built by the scout had, in the mean time, blazed brightly up, and Prairie Pilot found himself the prisoner of half a score of as hard a looking set of villains as he had ever seen on the border.

A closer scrutiny of them, and he knew that he was in the hands of the robber-band of the Hermit Chief, and that no mercy would be shown him he well knew, for often had he trailed one of the Bandit Brotherhood to his death, and fearlessly waged war against the bold renegades who spread terror along the frontier.

Presently a horseman rode up to the spot, and after a few words with several of the men, dismounted and approached the scout.

He was a man of striking appearance, clad in a suit consisting of buck-skin leggings, top-

boots, a military coat, and Mexican sombrero, while he wore a sword, and a pair of revolvers in his belt.

His face was exceedingly handsome, with its bronzed skin, dark hair and mustache, and bright eyes; though there was a certain bold and reckless look stamped upon every feature.

His hair was worn long, and his mustache was curled up at either end, while his whole "make-up" was that of a border exquisite.

He seemed scarcely more than twenty years of age, and was well mounted upon a dark bay mustang, large, wiry and vicious-looking.

Prairie Pilot had before seen the man, and in several engagements had endeavored to cut short his career of crime, but Satan seemed to always look after his own, and the young bandit leader had escaped.

In this man the scout recognized the field chief of the bandits, Captain Ralph, the lieutenant of the Hermit Chief.

"Are you not the man they call Prairie Pilot?" asked Captain Ralph.

"I am; are you not the man they call Captain Ralph, the murderer and horse-thief?" coolly replied Prairie Pilot.

"Hold, Sir Scout, or I will cut you down where you stand," angrily cried the young bandit.

"Cutting throats is your trade, youngster."

"Do you dare me, and in my power, fellow?"

"You dare not unbind me and meet me as man to man, although men say you are no coward," sneeringly returned the scout.

For an instant Captain Ralph seemed about to strike the scout with his sword; but then, as if changing his mind, he sheathed his weapon, and said, quietly:

"Your pluck will be tried, sir, ere the Hermit Chief is done with you. Come, boys; lead him on to the stronghold, but blindfold him first. I suppose it would be useless to attempt to capture his horse. I would give a cool thousand for that animal."

"No, Captain Ralph, there are not horses enough in the band to run down that steed. Shall we take the prisoner at once to the chief?" asked one of the men, who seemed to be an under officer.

"No; father is not at all well, and I do not wish to disturb him. Put the prisoner in the cliff cave."

So saying, Captain Ralph rode away, and a few moments after Prairie Pilot was blindfolded, and then mounted upon a mustang, after which the party set off on a trail leading still further into the range of hills.

CHAPTER V.

THE TWO CAPTIVES.

THE position chosen by the wary old chief of the bandits, for a stronghold, was certainly a most desirable one, for it was under the shelter of a mountain, and upon a level plateau, comprising half a hundred acres.

From this plateau, where were built the log huts of the band, a narrow and steep pathway led down into a fertile valley half a mile below where were herded the horses and cattle stolen from the settlements, and which, at a moment's warning of approaching danger could be driven into the pens on the hillside above.

Through the plateau ran a considerable mountain stream, which formed a fall, and plunged into the valley below, the roar of the waters being audible for miles away.

The cliff or mountain which protected the camp on the north, rose to a height of three hundred feet, and in bygone times some convulsion of nature had split it in twain, leaving a chasm not more than twenty feet wide, running back through the hill for half a mile.

Large pieces of rock had fallen down into this chasm, and becoming wedged there near the bottom, formed a kind of tunnel or cave, which led back through the hill into the valley beyond, and formed thereby a means of escape for the bandits, should their camp be attacked and carried.

Having no use for this tunnel, unless in case of retreat, the bandits had turned the cave into a storehouse for their plunder, and a prison for their captives.

Into this place, in one of the small caves, Prairie Pilot was taken, and by the light of a torch he saw that there was a rude cot there, with a blanket upon it.

Worn out, he threw himself upon the cot; and after removing his bonds, and placing irons upon his feet, which were connected with a chain leading through a fissure in the rocks, his guards left him to his melancholy reflections.

As soon as he was alone Prairie Pilot at once set about some plan of escape, but soon realizing that escape was impossible, he philosophically gave it up, for the present, and threw himself down to rest.

When he awoke it was broad daylight, and glancing around him he at once realized his perilous situation.

But he had only a moment for reflection, before a form darkened the entrance to the cavern, and a man stood before him.

At a glance the scout saw that he was a German, and his remarkable costume brought a smile to the captive's face, and no wonder, for the soldier, the Indian, the Mexican, hunter and citizen had contributed to the wardrobe.

"Vell, vat you laff, mine frint? Ish it so funny to have to die, dot you feel goot?"

"Oh, no, Dutchy; but you have no objection to my smiling, and who could help it, when looking at you?"

"Vel, mine Gott in Himmel, vat ish de matter mit minself dat you laff?" angrily replied the German.

"Do not let your angry passions rise, my bandit scarecrow, but give me the breakfast I see you have brought me."

"It is petter ash vat I should give yer," replied the German, setting down a platter upon which was a tin cup of coffee, some bread, and jerked buffalo-meat.

"I am glad to hear it, Dutchy; but we will not quarrel, for I want you for a partner in a little enterprise in which there is gold to be made."

The German held up his finger in warning, and with a ludicrously knowing look and wink, turned and left the cave.

With a relish the scout dispatched his breakfast, and then walked as far as his chain would allow him, toward the entrance of the cavern.

From his position he could see the steep wall of the chasm, rising hundreds of feet above him, and their summit crowned with a growth of small trees.

"If I only had some friend to aid me, I could soon get out of this. Perhaps I can trust the Dutchman—ha—!"

The scout suddenly started, and seemed all attention, for a strange sound reached his ear, a strange sound for that lonely cavern and bandit camp.

The sound was that of voices—not the voices of rude men, but the soft tones of women.

Approaching cautiously the crevice through which the sound came, the scout heard a voice in conversation he at once recognized as that of the Phantom Spy.

Listening attentively he heard her say:

"I think, lady, there is a better chance now of your escape than before, for though I could have trusted Dutch, he is not quick-witted enough for the danger he would have had to meet."

"Then you have some one you can trust more fully?" asked a sad, sweet voice, which thrilled Prairie Pilot to his very heart.

"Yes, and it is accident that he is here. Had he taken my warning he would not now have been in his present deadly peril."

"He is in danger, then?"

"Yes, fearful danger, for he is a prisoner to our band, and I know that my father will have him shot, for he has done our band much harm."

"To whom do you refer?" asked the same sweet voice.

"To one whom men call the Prairie Pilot, one of the most daring scouts on the frontier."

"I have heard of him at the fort, and also in the settlement. He seems to be greatly admired by the soldiers and settlers and feared by the Indians and renegades."

"Yes, and they have cause to fear him, for he is a deadly foe. Last night, lady, he captured me on the prairie, and nobly released me, on condition that I would not let the band know where his train was."

"I promised; he believed me and let me go! but, although I warned him away from these hills, he must have struck my trail and followed me, coming right into an ambush of our men, placed as an outer guard."

"He was captured, after killing one of our men, and fighting bravely, and is now a prisoner, confined in a cave near this, awaiting the recovery of my father, the Hermit Chief, who will certainly condemn him to death."

"Poor man; how sincerely do I feel for him."

"God bless her!" ejaculated the scout, and then he continued: "Eavesdroppers do sometimes hear good of themselves as well as evil."

"Yes, but I am determined that he shall not die if I can help it," resolutely responded the Phantom Spy.

"You are a noble girl. How I wish I could take you away from this awful bandit camp."

"Lady, all I love in the world are here. I have no other home than these wild hills, no other companions than these reckless, cruel men around me, and whose deeds I loathe. Did I not loathe them, I would not now endeavor to restore you to those you love and who love you."

"I believe you, kind girl; but, my poor father! how he must suffer to be in ignorance of my fate, and believe me dead."

"You shall soon be free, if I can make you so, lady; so cheer up and eat the breakfast I have brought you. This afternoon my father wishes to see you, to question you regarding the movements of the soldiers. I will conduct you to him, and I beg that you will not anger him with your proud spirit."

"I will try to do as you wish, sweet girl, and your words give me hope that ere long I may escape; but please do not leave the Prairie Pilot to his fate."

"Trust me, lady," replied the Phantom Spy, and the scout heard her walk away, and feeling that his fellow captive was alone he determined in some way to communicate with her.

CHAPTER VI.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

CAREFULLY examining the crevices in the wall of rock, Prairie Pilot was enabled to find one that looked into the adjoining cavern.

The first thing that he observed was the generally comfortable appearance of the little cave, for it had a carpet on the rock floor, a chair, a table, upon which was the remnant of a good breakfast, and a cot, with some pretensions to neatness and comfort.

Upon the side of the cot sat the occupant—a maiden of perhaps eighteen.

Her form was clad in a close-fitting riding habit of dark-gray cloth, and there was an elegance and grace about her figure that at once won the admiration of the scout.

Presently a wealth of golden hair was thrown back, the bowed head was raised, and Prairie Pilot beheld a vision of beauty in the lovely face, and large blue eyes gazing sadly and wistfully out into the daylight at the mouth of the cave.

"Lady!"

The tones of the scout were soft and kind; but they startled the maiden, and she sprung to her feet.

"I am here; like yourself I am a prisoner—"

"Indeed! yes, I see from whence comes your voice now. Are you the Prairie Pilot?" said the maiden, in cautious tones.

"So men call me. A short while since I overheard your conversation with the young girl who visited you. When she returns, beg her to visit my cavern, and perhaps we can arrange some plan of escape together. Now I cannot say more; but keep up a brave heart, and all will come out well."

The scout spoke hopefully and the maiden felt really cheerful, for she believed that her fellow-prisoner could, though a captive himself, aid her in her dire distress.

Throwing himself again upon his cot, the scout began to plot and plan some means of escape. Slowly the hours passed away, and again he heard voices in the adjoining cave.

Rising, he went the length of his chain toward the entrance of his prison, and a moment after there confronted him two forms, the fair captive and the Phantom Spy—the latter no longer attired in her ghostly robe, but in a neatly-fitting dress of dark cloth.

"Ah, scout! I warned you, and you would not heed me," exclaimed the young girl, in a sad voice.

"True; but if I heeded every warning of danger, I would soon fear to move from the settlements," and the scout turned his earnest admiring gaze full upon the captive maiden.

Their eyes met, and the maiden felt that if there was a man on earth she could trust it was the Prairie Pilot, and with evident admiration she glanced at his splendid form and handsome, fearless face.

"We must not linger here; but hasten to my father, who would see you, lady; when we come back I will see you, sir."

So saying the young girl led her companion away through the chasm, while the scout threw himself upon the ground and gazed far above him to the summit of the other wall of the gulch.

Presently a step was heard approaching, and the German again appeared with the prisoner's evening meal.

"Well, Dutchy, what have you to tempt my appetite?"

"Vel, I hash some goot dinner for you, mine frint; te young missis she cook it mit her own pooty fingers."

"Indeed! The young lady is the daughter of the Hermit Chief, is she not?"

"Dat ish so, an' her brother, Captain Raluf, ish te son mit te ole man."

"Captain Ralph her brother?"

"Yas; he ish te tuyvil, but she pe an angel gal."

"She is a fine girl, Dutchy; but, tell me, what are they going to do with me?"

"Hang you mit te neck."

"When?" and the scout spoke with perfect calmness.

"Mine Gott! vot, you no scared?"

"A threatened man lives long, Dutchy; but when am I to be hung?"

"As soon as te Hermit Chief say so; but I must go away now; I see you to-morrow."

The scout made no reply, and the German walked away, Prairie Pilot making no effort to detain him, for he had made a discovery that deeply interested him.

As he lay in the mouth of the cavern, his eyes ever and anon glancing toward the ribbon of blue sky above, he suddenly caught sight of a human face peering cautiously down into the chasm.

Narrowly watching it, he soon saw the form of a man come in full view, and he almost gave vent to one of his wild, ringing war-cries, for he recognized in the cautious stranger none other than Bravo Bob!

Ere he could discover whether Bob had seen him or not, there came the sound of footsteps, and the two maidens returned, the eyes of the captive being red with tears, for she had just had a stormy interview with the Hermit Chief, who told her it was his intention to hold her a prisoner until her father, Colonel Radcliff, paid a heavy ransom for her.

Ruth knew that her father was not a rich man, and that if he paid the sum demanded, it would beggar him, and she appealed to the mercy of the old chief, who, an invalid, reclined upon his cot in one of the rooms of his cabin, and kept his fierce eyes constantly upon the face of the maiden.

"Girl, what is your name? Tell me that, and I will know whether your father is wealthy enough to pay my price, for I know the limit of every settler's and officer's purse on this border."

"My name I decline to give you, sir; but you will find my father able to resent most bitterly the insult of his daughter's capture," proudly replied Ruth Radcliff.

"Nonsense; my men captured you within a mile of the settlement. You should not have ventured so far on horseback, girl, without company; but I have you now and I intend to make money out of your capture."

"Is there no hope for me, sir? At the fort are two of your men, condemned to death: will you exchange me for them?"

"Curse the men! What care I for them? If they die, there are others to fill their place."

"There are soldiers on this frontier, girl, and scouts, and settlers, and Indians; but I, the Hermit Chief, am ruler, and this whole border shall find it so."

"Ione, take the maiden back and to-morrow I will send out spies to find out who she is."

The Hermit Chief waved his hand, and his daughter, whom he had addressed as Ione, turned silently and sadly away, leading Ruth Radcliff with her, back to her lonely prison.

When away from the presence of the Hermit Chief, the proud spirit of Ruth broke down, and she burst into tears; but Ione cheered her all in her power, and when they reached the spot where the scout lay, his untasted supper by his side, she had gained her usual composure.

"I trust your visit to the chief has resulted in good to you, lady," quietly said the scout.

"No, sir; he demands a ransom impossible for my father to pay; but this noble young girl bids me hope."

"Yes, there is hope for you; but I must leave you now; and lady, you need not return immediately to your cave. If not to-night, I will see you to-morrow."

With a wave of her hand the young girl walked rapidly away, leaving Ruth Radcliff still standing near the spot where the Prairie Pilot lay at full length, his eyes gazing earnestly toward the summit of the chasm.

CHAPTER VII.

TAKING DESPERATE CHANCES.

AFTER the departure of Ione, the Phantom Spy, the scout said, quietly:

"The daughter of the old Hermit Chief seems

inclined to aid us, but I would rather not have her do so, for two reasons—"

"And those are?" asked Ruth Radcliff.

"First, it will be at great risk to herself, if she aid us, and second, I desire to wage a bitter war against this band, and do not wish to feel that I owe a kindness to the chief's daughter that must stay my hand."

"How noble she seems, to have for her companions a band of robbers. What terrible fate led her to such a life?" asked Ruth, feelingly.

"I know not, and it is a sad thing that she has, in father and brother, chiefs of a band of outlaws. Strange as it seems, I feel that I have met her brother and herself before, but where my memory fails. Their faces haunt me with some memory of the past. Were I to see their father, perhaps I could then recall all; but the Hermit Chief has been the ruler of his band only, his young son being the leader in all their raids and deadly encounters."

"Who, or what they are, none know; but, certain it is the outlaws are held well in hand, and never have I known an instance of where one, even with promise of his life, ever betrayed the Brotherhood."

Deeply interested in the words of the scout, Ruth listened attentively, and then said:

"I have now met the father and daughter, and a remarkable pair they are. The son I have never seen; but, sir, if you do not accept aid from the maiden, how can you manage to escape?"

"I will take the chances without her. Lady, see there!" and the scout pointed far up the chasm wall to where was visible Bravo Bob, quietly seated in the shelter of a niche in the rocks.

"A guard of the bandits. Perhaps I'd better not linger here—"

"No; it is Bravo Bob, the best friend I have in the world. He has struck my trail and followed me here—to rescue me."

"Alone?"

"Doubtless. I know of none who would have dared to come with him—at least any that he could have found thus soon. See! he has thrown something down to me. Will you pick it up, please, lady, for I am in irons, you see?"

Quickly Ruth stepped forward, and took up the object that had fallen from above—a piece of paper wrapped around a small stone.

Taking it, the Prairie Pilot read aloud, written in lead-pencil, in a bold, legible hand:

"A greeting to you from above, old fellow; sorry to see you in duance vile, but glad to see you are not in the land of silence."

"I arrived this afternoon, having trailed you, and by a flank movement reached my present position."

"The train has made tracks for the posts, under the guidance of Scalp-lock and Yankee."

"I have discovered that the rear end of this chasm is guarded by two sentinels—there must be a tunnel through, as they could never have reached their present stand without a day's journey around."

"Find out the cave if you can; at dark I will move on the two guards, and you shall be free."

"I met a party of soldiers on the prairie looking for the daughter of Colonel Radcliff, the new commandant of the upper posts."

"By the description given me of her, I recognize her in the lady near you."

"Your position shows you to be in irons, so when it is dark I will lower you a file and one of my pistols, and then you must press on through the cave to the outer entrance."

"If I discover anything of importance, will communicate again. Bob."

"He certainly is a true friend, and brave man," said Ruth, when the scout had read all.

"None truer or braver, Miss Radcliff, for such I believe, is your name?"

"Yes, sir; my father arrived at his new command only a week ago, and it was while riding to the settlement, half a mile from the fort, to see an old schoolmate, that I was captured, when little dreaming of danger," replied the maiden.

Hearing an approaching footstep, Ruth rapidly ran into her cave, and the Prairie Pilot was alone.

A moment after Ione, the girl spy, appeared, and said, pleasantly:

"Though you put your own head into the noose, Prairie Pilot, I do not intend to let it remain there; but I cannot act to-night as the whole band are at present in the stronghold."

"To-morrow at daylight my brother goes off on a raid with his men, and you will be allowed to live until his return, when, if you do not accept certain terms offered you, you have to die."

"There is dishonor in those terms, doubtless?"

"Yes; but life is sweet."

The scout smiled and remained silent, and Ione continued:

"When my brother has gone I can act with less fear of detection; to-night I can do nothing; but, as I had an opportunity to rescue from my father's room your belt of arms, I did so. I will leave them in the care of the lady in the next cave."

Prairie Pilot's eyes fairly flashed with delight as Ione threw back a *serape* which hung from her shoulders, and displayed his unerring rifle and belt, containing his revolvers, knife and cartridge pouches; but he said, quietly:

"I thank you from my heart, fair girl; you have done me a kindness I shall one day reciprocate."

"I do not wish to see a brave man die like a dog," responded Ione, as she walked away, and disappeared in the cavern which was the prison of Ruth Radcliff.

A moment after the young girl again passed the scout, and was soon lost to sight in the gloom, for night was coming on apace and darkness already filled the chasm.

But, far up, outlined against the bright sky, still tinged with the rosy hues of sunset, stood Bravo Bob, his eagle eye watching every move of his enemies, and taking in every chance in his favor.

An hour passed and darkness rested upon all; but the quick ear of Prairie Pilot caught a sound which he seemed to at once recognize, for he called in a low tone to Ruth, who, the next moment stood by his side.

"Miss Radcliff, I heard a sound against the wall yonder; will you kindly see if Bravo Bob has not lowered us his promised aid?"

Ruth went to the other side of the chasm, and feeling in the darkness, her hand soon touched a small string, bearing a weight on the end.

A moment after she held in her hand a pistol and a file, and unloosing them, she found also a slip of paper.

These she bore to the scout; but he cried, quickly:

"Back to your cave! quick!"

Not a moment too soon did Ruth escape, for the next moment a flickering light was seen, and two men approached, bearing a lantern.

Turning it full upon the recumbent scout, the man who held the lantern said, harshly:

"You prefer to lie on hard rocks to your cot, do you?"

"A man who is condemned to die wishes to breathe all the pure air he can," quickly responded the scout.

"You take it coolly," responded the other man.

"My conscience is not blackened, as is yours, with crimes of robbery and murder."

"Go on, my hearty; you can have your say!"

"Come, Pete, let us see if the girl is all safe, and then go and relieve the boys," said the first speaker, and they moved on to the next cave.

Flashing the light into the face of Ruth, who sprang half-up, as if from a sound sleep, they laughed at her supposed fright, and walked on through the tunnel of caverns.

A moment after Ruth was again by the side of the scout, who drew from his pocket a match, and lighting it, read the slip of paper that had descended with the file and pistol.

"There are but two guards, and they will doubtless be relieved at dark; then I will act."

"Find your way out, as soon as you have freed yourself of your irons, to the mouth of the chasm, and I will meet you there."

"Brave fellow; now, Miss Radcliff, hope brightens for us; but you must return to your cot, and as soon as I have gotten rid of my irons I will come for you."

"In the meantime I will file these irons off my ankles."

The cool, confident manner of Prairie Pilot gave Ruth every hope, and throwing herself upon the cot, she awaited in breathless silence and suspense.

A short while and again a light flashed into the cavern, and two men stood there, but not the two who had before passed by.

"Wide awake, my beauty? You'll dim those pretty eyes if you lose your sleep," said one of the bandits; but, whether in a kind or unkind tone Ruth could not tell.

Another glance into the cave of the scout, a jeering remark from one of them, and they passed on toward the camp.

An hour later, and Prairie Pilot stood beside Ruth, a man no longer in irons.

"Come, Miss Radcliff, I am ready now; give me my arms, which the fair spy left here, and we will depart at once."

Ruth could hardly refrain from a cry of joy, and the next moment they had departed from the cave, and started forth upon their desperate chance of escape.

CHAPTER VIII.

BRAVO BOB AT WORK.

WHEN Bravo Bob lowered the package to Prairie Pilot, by the aid of a string made by cutting his blanket into strips, he drew up the line when he felt it relieved of its burden, and at once began to descend the other slope of the hill range.

After a walk of a mile he came to a small valley, thickly overgrown with grass, and through which trickled a stream of clear water.

Here, unsaddled and picketed out, were two steeds. One was the property of Bravo Bob, the other none other than Racer, whom the guide had caught running loose upon the prairie, and who recognizing him, instantly trotted up to him.

"Well, old fellows, you have had a rich feast and good rest; now to work!" said Bravo Bob, kindly, and he at once set to work to saddle and bridle the steeds.

Giving them a drink from the cool spring, he then mounted his own horse, and, followed by Racer, rode along round the edge of the valley.

After a short ride he halted at the foot of the hill leading up to the rear side of the chasm, and hitching the two animals, ascended cautiously the steep path, until, in the moonlight, he discovered the bold face of the cliff, and the fissure that he knew was the cut-in dividing the mountain in twain.

"Now I must be cautious, or I'll have to use my rifle, and that might spoil all," he muttered, and throwing himself upon the ground he wormed along like a snake, slowly and noiselessly drawing nearer to a large boulder, where he knew, from his observation taken in the daytime, the two guards were stationed.

It was fully an hour before he drew near the boulder, against which stood the form of a man, gazing at the moon as it arose above the distant hilltops.

At his feet, close against the rock, lay a muffled form, the other guard, wrapped in sleep doubtless.

Bravo Bob was now within twenty feet of the guards, and the moonlight shining full in his handsome face showed that it was marred by a look of stern determination.

"It is a pity, and a dirty job, but I must do it."

"If he was an Indian I would not hesitate; still, Prairie Pilot must not die!"

So saying, Bravo Bob arose quickly and silently to his feet: his knife was held in his upraised right hand, and then glittered like a wheel of diamonds in the moonlight as it was hurled with unerring and terrible force at the silent and unsuspecting guard.

Fair and deadly it struck him in the neck, crunching through bone and muscle, and sending the strong man quickly to the ground.

With two mighty bounds Bravo Bob threw himself upon the half-awake and recumbent guard, and a clutch of iron was upon his throat.

"Struggle one instant and you shall die," he sternly cried in the bandit's ear, while with his other hand he held a pistol to his head.

"You hold the winning hand, pard," said the man, as Bravo Bob released his clutch upon his throat.

"Yes, and I intend to win the game. Your comrade lies there, dead, as you see, and you shall quickly follow him if you are not willing to do as I ask you."

"You want me to betray my comrades—"

"No! I wish you to lead me, singly, into their camp. Are you afraid of a single man?"

"No, and if you are willing to take the chances, come on; but you must be crazy."

"I am not crazy; I only have a duty to perform."

"Lead me to the spot I desire, and back here, and I ask no more."

"Then I will spare your life; attempt to betray me, and you shall die."

"When am I to be free?"

"Upon my return to this spot; I will then bind you and leave you here for the morning guard to find you—or—"

"Or what?"

"I will carry you with me a few miles and release you in time to return here by daylight; and then you can tell what lie you please, about being attacked, your comrade being killed, and you beating back the enemy single-handed."

"A drowning man catches at a straw," my old Sunday School teacher used to say, when urging me to catch at religion as a means of salvation, so I will accept your terms," disconsolately replied the bandit, whose whole manner and conversation proved that he had seen better days ere he entered upon a life of crime.

Searching his prisoner to see that he had no arms secreted about his person, and drawing his knife from the stiffening neck of the other guard, Bravo Bob securely bound his captive's hands, and holding firmly onto his arm, bade him proceed.

The bandit at once led off, and approaching the cut in the cliff, entered it, and moved rapidly on in the darkness, for ever and anon they would have to pass through a rocky tunnel.

After a walk of ten minutes they came to where a large mass of rock had fallen, forming a huge cavern beneath.

When about to enter into the darkness of this, from the indistinct light that penetrated down into the canyon, a stern voice suddenly cried:

"Hold! on your lives, halt!"

Both Bravo Bob and his prisoner were momentarily startled by the sudden challenge; but the former cried quickly:

"The Prairie Pilot—hoop-la!"

"Bob, old fellow, a moment more and I would have called in your checks; but who have you here?" and, springing forward, out of the darkness of the cavern, Prairie Pilot confronted his friend.

"This is one of the guards at the mouth of the canyon—"

"And the other is—"

"In the devil's employ; but come, we have no time to tarry—where is your fellow-captive?"

"Here!—Miss Radcliff, this is my friend, Bravo Bob, the best scout on the plains," and at the introduction Ruth came forward and clasping the hand of Bravo Bob, said feelingly:

"And to whom we, in a great measure, owe our escape."

"Now, Bob, we'll be off. Come."

Again the bandit led the way, his captor by his side, and in a few moments more they came out at the front of the cliff.

At the sight of the dead guard Ruth shuddered, and drew closer to the Prairie Pilot, while Bravo Bob said quickly:

"Now, my man, you have done your part of our contract—will you have us bind you and leave you here, or carry you with us a few miles and turn you loose?"

"The latter would look best for me—for if I am suspected by my comrades my life is not worth a *pesos*."

"All right; come on."

Again Bravo Bob led the way, the Prairie Pilot quietly taking Ruth up in his strong arms and carrying her down the steep and rocky hill-side, for, retarded as she was, by her long skirt, and wearing light shoes, she could not have easily walked.

"Miss Radcliff can ride your horse, Bob, while we walk," said Prairie Pilot, as they reached the foot of the hill.

"Not so bad as that, comrade, for I have the Racer with me."

The delight of Prairie Pilot was unbounded, and the next moment he stood beside his gallant steed, and warmly patted his neck, while the faithful animal seemed overjoyed and whinnied in a low, happy tone.

"Miss Radcliff, I can give you a seat behind me, for Racer can easily do double duty," said Prairie Pilot, and Raising Ruth to her seat, he the next moment sprung into the saddle, and Bravo Bob having mounted, with his prisoner behind him, the party set off at a slow trot through the forest.

A ride of several miles brought them to a valley, and here the prisoner was told to dismount and return to his post, which he gladly did, thanking Bob kindly for his life, and the next moment disappearing in the gloom of the timber.

"Now, Bravo, it is a hundred miles to the fort, and we must push on rapidly, for both the Racer and your horse can stand it—if Miss Radcliff can?"

"I can stand any fatigue to once more reach home," earnestly replied Ruth, and at a rapid pace the two animals were urged forward in their flight from the bandit camp of the Hermit Chief.

CHAPTER IX. THE RETURN.

BLUE WATER settlement was a bevy of pleasant prairie farms, with a fort on the river, and within easy call, in case of danger from Indians on the war-path, and marauding bands of outlaws, who often raided upon the pioneer settlers of the far frontier.

The settlement acknowledged as its head a wealthy settler by the name of Amos Arlington, a man of fifty years of age, and a genial gentleman.

Once Amos Arlington had been a wealthy planter in Arkansas, but the death of his wife, whom he loved almost to idolatry, caused him to dispose of his plantation, and leaving his only child, a daughter of eight years of age, with his sister, he emigrated to the far West and settled upon the place he dwelt at the time of the opening of this story.

Around him had gathered other settlers, until they formed a pleasant community, and near them was the fort, with a hundred soldiers and a dozen officers, several of whom had their wives with them.

The commandant of the fort, and one ordered there a week before this story opens, was Colonel Arthur Radcliff, a man under forty years of age, although his daughter, Ruth, was eighteen years of age.

Colonel Radcliff was a dashing, handsome man, a severe, almost cruel disciplinarian, who had passed his military life mostly in forts on the Atlantic board.

The coming of the colonel and his beautiful daughter to the outpost was a happy event for those stationed there, and doubly glad were the younger officers and gallants of the settlement, when they learned that Ida Arlington, the daughter of the settler, came with them, the two maidens having been schoolmates, and of course delighted that they would still be near each other, for they were the best of friends.

Under the care of Colonel Radcliff, Ida had come West, and was lovingly welcomed by the father, and warmly greeted by all.

It was when riding over to see her friend Ida, that Ruth Radcliff had suddenly ridden upon a small party of bandit scouts and had been carried off to the stronghold.

When she did not return at night, her father rode over to the Arlington homestead, and learned with horror that she had not been there.

At once the alarm was spread, and the settlers and soldiers joined in the search; but morning came and no tidings were had of the missing girl.

Then a scout discovered the strange trail of the bandit party, and with it was mingled the hoof-tracks of Ruth's horse, and it was known that she was captured.

But by whom?

That was the vexing question, and in almost despair her father headed a scouting party, and followed the trail.

But, after half a day's journey it was lost on the prairie by fresher and larger trails, and they knew not which way to go.

At length they took the trail leading southward, and came upon a hunting-party of Indians, whom the impetuous colonel at once attacked.

After the loss of two soldiers and a dozen of the red-skins, it was discovered that they were not the guilty kidnappers, and in despair Colonel Radcliff ordered a return to the fort, hoping against hope that his daughter might have returned, or been discovered by some of the other parties who had gone forth in search of the missing maiden.

But, after an absence of several days, the sorrowing father found that no trace of poor Ruth could be found, and almost heart-broken, he could do no more than to again send forth spies and scouts, offering a large reward for any tidings of the maiden.

The evening of the fourth day since the disappearance of Ruth was approaching, and with nervous tread, hands clasped behind him, and head bent down, Colonel Radcliff was pacing to and fro in front of his quarters, when a wild shout startled him from his reverie.

Glancing quickly up he saw two horsemen approaching him at a gallop, and behind the one mounted upon a superb black horse he caught sight of a girlish form and long fluttering skirt.

Tottering forward, for he was weak from very joy, he caught in his outstretched arms his restored daughter, who, with a flood of joyous tears, laid her head upon her father's breast.

A few words then told all, and Prairie Pilot and Bravo Bob having dismounted, were presented to the colonel by the happy Ruth.

"I have heard of you, sir, ere I came West, and often since I have been on the border—you are a scout, I believe?" and the colonel grasped the hand of Prairie Pilot.

"I am, sir."

"And I have much to thank you for, and you, too, my friend, more than I can ever repay; but still, I can give you a position with me, sir, and your companion, too."

"Will you accept the position of chief of scouts for this post?"

"Colonel Radcliff, I did but my duty, sir,

toward your daughter. I deserve no thanks or reward for it. I am a scout, a guide, a hunter, anything that men choose to call me, and so is my friend, Bravo Bob."

"As you offer me a position with you, I accept it, but as no reward for my services. Yet Bob, here, must be second to me in rank, for to him is due the greater praise, if to any one."

"You shall both remain with me, for I am not pleased with either of the scouts or guides now at the post—at least there are none of them fit for leaders, and I came hither for work."

Thus it was decided, and Prairie Pilot and Bravo Bob at once were installed in their new quarters, greatly to the pleasure of all at the fort, and also of the settlers, who were glad to feel that two such famous scouts were to be in their midst, for afar off was echoing the rumble of an Indian war, which the attack of Colonel Radcliff a few days before upon an innocent band—at least innocent of the charge of kidnapping Ruth—had done much to kindle into flame.

Then again the Hermit Chief and his outlaw band were beginning to grow daily more bold and troublesome, and the settlers, as well as the soldiers, were preparing for stirring times.

With the greatest joy Ida Arlington welcomed her friend back, and the two maidens held a long talk together over the adventures of Ruth, who told Ida how noble and brave was the Prairie Pilot.

"He certainly is the handsomest man I ever saw, not excepting my splendid Rafael," said Ida.

"He is, indeed, and Bravo Bob is a splendid fellow, too. If it were not for Rafael Randolph I believe you would love him, Ida—"

"As you do his friend, Prairie Pilot, eh?"

"Nonsense, Ida," and Ruth's face turned crimson.

"Well, I predict that it will not be 'nonsense, Ida,' and that you will love the scout as dearly as he loves you—"

"Loves me?"

"Yes, how could he help it? But, I declare, Ruth, how strange it is that we two, who were belles in New York, should slight the city beaux and find men to love on the frontier of the far West!"

"Strange, but true, Ida."

"Ha! you admit it, then?"

"I admit that I never saw a man who held the influence over me which the Prairie Pilot does, and yet I do not even know his name."

"Well, I hope true love will run smooth in both cases, and that you can marry your hero next fall, when I do Rafael."

"What! do you intend to marry so soon, Ida?"

"Yes; I have told my father all, and when Rafael visits us in a month or two, as he said he would, and proves all I hope of him, we will be married."

"Why, it is only a few weeks since you met him—"

"Yes, but you remember he saved my life, when that Indian chief seized me and bore me away from camp, when I refused to become Mrs. Big-Bear-with-the-long-claw."

"True, he saved your life, and is a handsome fellow, and though apparently a little wild, seemed to be a good fellow; but, do you know him, or aught of him?"

"Ruth, he says he is the son of a wealthy trader in Texas, and, fond of a life on the plains, is his father's business agent out here. We traveled two weeks together, you know, coming West, and I feel that I know Rafael thoroughly. Certain it is that I love him."

"I hope you will find him all you believe him to be, Ida—but—but—"

"Ruth, what do you know of the Prairie Pilot?"

"Nothing," and as she replied Ruth Radcliff's face became crimson, for she felt that the tables had been turned upon her, when she was moralizing with Ida upon loving a young man who had joined their caravan by accident, for Rafael Randolph had been riding along over the prairie one night when there suddenly flitted by him two dark forms.

A cry, a woman's voice, sent him in chase, and after a desperate encounter with a huge Indian chief of the Sioux, he had slain him and rescued Ida Arlington from his power, for, a hunter for the train going West, he had seen and loved the maiden, whom he had seized and borne away with him.

From that night Rafael Randolph continued on with the train, until it neared Blue Water settlement, when he left, taking a southern trail, and promising before long to see the beautiful

girl whom he had rescued from a fearful fate, and who had promised to become his wife.

Thus it was that both Ruth and Ida had met with a strange and thrilling adventure, and both learned to love the men who had rescued them from their danger.

CHAPTER X.

PRAIRIE PILOT AT BAY.

THE hope of the maidens, "that their true love would run smoothly," was certainly not realized in the case of Ruth, for her father, Colonel Radcliff, was a keen-sighted man, and it took him a very short while to discover not only that Prairie Pilot loved his daughter with all the strength of his strong nature, but also that she returned that love; for, a deep reader of human nature, the colonel read Ruth's secret, while others only suspected it.

True, the scout was a gentleman, and certainly a thoroughly educated one, and his manners were as polished as those of any society beau; but then, over his life hung a mystery, and his real name was not even known at the fort.

On entering upon his duties as chief of scouts, Prairie Pilot at once set to work to discipline his force, and soon had under his command as brave and efficient a set of hunters, guides and scouts as any fort could desire, and his services to the commandant soon became invaluable.

But then, he had been engaged to scout, not to make love, and Colonel Radcliff could not forgive him the offense of loving his daughter.

Upon the part of Prairie Pilot, he seemed ever on the look-out to serve the interests of the fort and settlement, and though he now and then passed a leisure hour with Ruth, he never neglected a single duty, and day and night seemed constantly in the saddle.

Seeming to realize fully the danger ahead, for rumors of Indian troubles were upon every breeze, Prairie Pilot urged Colonel Radcliff to strengthen his defenses, and also to organize the settlers into a kind of military reserve, while they also strengthened their own houses for a state of siege in case of attack.

Colonel Radcliff acted promptly upon all the suggestions of Prairie Pilot, for he had perfect confidence in him; but, between the two there seemed to exist a restraint, noticeable from their first meeting upon the part of the scout.

At length Colonel Radcliff heard a rumor in circulation, that Prairie Pilot and Ruth were destined to make a match, and this so angered him that he forbade Ruth to see the scout alone again.

This command the colonel believed was obeyed, until one afternoon he beheld the two lovers quietly walking together upon the river-bank.

This so infuriated the father, that he seized Ruth by the shoulder and rudely bade her go to her quarters, and then, turning to the scout, said, angrily:

"I've a mind, sir, to lay my sword over your shoulders, for your presuming to—"

"I advise you not to attempt it, Colonel Radcliff, for I am not always a patient man," was the cool interruption of the scout.

In a frenzy of rage, Colonel Radcliff drew his sword, and, unheeding the cry of Ruth for him to forbear, he raised the weapon, as though to strike the scout.

Instantly it was seized, dragged violently from his hand and hurled into the river, where it sunk from sight.

"Ho! ho! the guard!" yelled the maddened officer, and two soldiers, on duty a short distance away, ran rapidly toward him.

"Behold yonder mutineer! Take him prisoner."

The soldiers advanced in surprise to obey, when the stern, ringing voice of the scout caused them to halt:

"Hold! men, if you advance on me you peril your lives."

"Father, oh, father, be noble, be generous, for you are forgetting yourself. That man saved me from a terrible fate," cried Ruth, seizing the arm of her parent, who was wild with rage.

But he heeded her not, and throwing her roughly aside, cried in loud tones:

"Attention! shoot that man down in his tracks!"

The soldiers hesitated, and loud the order rung out:

"Do you hear! shoot him down like a dog!"

The Prairie Pilot, after hurling the sword of his commander into the river, had folded his arms upon his broad breast, and stood calm and quiet; his eagle eye ranging from Colonel Radcliff to the two soldiers, and then falling upon Ruth, while his face wore an expression rather of sorrow than anger.

At the colonel's order to the soldiers, his arms dropped from across his breast, and his right hand rested upon the butt of a revolver, while his eyes flashed fire.

At the second order to the troopers they raised their guns as if to obey, when suddenly the revolver of Prairie Pilot leaped from its holster, two rapid reports followed, and the two unfortunate men fell dead in their tracks.

For an instant there fell upon all a silence of death, and then came a cry of alarm from the fort, and Ruth rushed toward Prairie Pilot.

"You have killed them, but it was to save your own life. Fly now while you can. Yonder is your horse; fly while you can! For my sake, go!"

"I will go, for it were certain death to remain. Ruth, we shall meet again. Farewell."

So saying the scout gave a shrill call, and quickly Racer dashed to his side, for he had been feasting himself upon the luxurious grass that grew upon the river bank.

Colonel Radcliff rushed forward as if to detain him, but with a bound Prairie Pilot was in his saddle—a wave of his hand to Ruth, and with the speed of a bird he was away and soon lost to sight in the timber.

Frenzied by what had happened, Colonel Radcliff was almost beside himself, and loudly ordered men to start in pursuit and bring back Prairie Pilot dead or alive.

Though surprised at the order, it was promptly obeyed, and a score of fleet horsemen started in rapid pursuit, an Indian warrior, one of the scout's own men, striking the trail and leading the troopers in full chase of a man whom, an hour before, all in the fort looked upon and respected next to Colonel Radcliff himself.

CHAPTER XI.

EXILED.

LATE at night, following the day of the flight of Prairie Pilot, the pursuing squadron returned, completely used up, and the officer in command presented himself before Colonel Radcliff and reported that it was impossible to overtake the scout, who had penetrated the hostile Indian country, and to follow him with the small force he had would have been madness.

Still angry after the occurrence of the day, Colonel Radcliff paced to and fro in moody silence for awhile, and then said:

"By heaven! he shall not escape me; I will either have that man or he will be killed by the Indians—"

"What is his crime, sir?" ventured Captain Claude Ashland, the young and gallant officer who had gone in pursuit of the scout, and who, by the way, was over head and ears in love with Ruth herself.

"Crime, Captain Ashland? His crime is that he has dared to love my daughter."

The captain winced, and his face flushed, as he muttered to himself:

"I thought as much, and the fair Ruth has dared to return it."

But he said aloud:

"I heard something about his killing two soldiers, sir."

"Yes, he shot down two troopers in cold blood, after he had jerked my sword from my hand and thrown it into the river."

"A queer way to win the consent of a parent to love his daughter," thought Captain Ashland, but he said:

"Indeed, sir! What motive could he have had for such an act?"

"Motive! Motive, sir? I'll tell you. As a scout, the hanger-on of a fort, he dared to love Ruth, and meeting him with her I threatened to lay my sword upon him, when, egad! he advised me not to do so."

"I disregarded his advice, and the result was as I related. Then I called the guard, and two troopers coming to my aid, I bade them seize the mutineer; but he warned them off, and I ordered them to shoot him down, and before they could obey, by heaven! he shot the pair of them through the brain, killing them instantly."

Now Claude Ashland was a fine fellow and a human man, and his sympathy went out for the poor soldiers, and then for the scout, whom he greatly admired; next he felt for poor Ruth, whom he dearly loved, although he knew his love was hopeless.

But for Colonel Radcliff he felt no sympathy whatever, and his mental decision was—"It served him right."

Claude Ashland left the room, and seeking his own quarters, his mess were soon in possession of the facts, and Colonel Radcliff was universally condemned for his action in the unfortunate affair, and the cool courage of the scout spoken of in terms of admiration.

With the early dawn of the following day Bravo Bob arrived at the fort, having been off for several days on a scouting expedition, and into his ears was poured the tale of horror.

Now Bravo Bob was somewhat inclined to profanity, when aroused, and he commenced a string of oaths that fairly frightened those who had told him of the affair.

After somewhat cooling off he boldly sought the quarters of his commander, who at the time was enjoying, in moody silence, his breakfast, Ruth with red and swollen eyes seated apposite to him.

"Colonel Radcliff, as you have driven my comrade from the camp, I have come to tender my resignation as scout also," abruptly said Bob, as he was ushered into the breakfast-room.

"The departure of Prairie Pilot should in no way urge your leaving, Bravo Bob," replied the colonel, blandly, for he did not care to lose his two best men, and wished to retain him as his chief of scouts, if in his power.

"It does interest me, sir, so much that I leave the post within the hour."

"If you remain, Bob, you will be the chief of scouts, in the place of the traitor and murderer—"

"Hold! Colonel Radcliff! Do not call Prairie Pilot a traitor and a murderer. He is as true as steel to friend or foe, and in killing the two troopers he but defended his own life, which any man may do."

"No, sir, I do not care to be chief of scouts at this post."

"But where will you go, for all around us the Indians are on the war-path, and hostilities must soon commence here?"

"True, sir; but I am not afraid of the red-skins, and besides I will be near at hand, and where I can give you warning, for I will scout for the settlement, for every true man is needed now."

"You speak the truth, and I am glad we shall not wholly lose your services. If you need a friend at any time come to me; but, as for your mutinous comrade, I have arranged that his race shall be soon run out."

"How so, Colonel Radcliff?"

"Here, sir, read this," and the officer handed Bravo Bob a paper, who took it and read:

"BLUE WATER MILITARY POST,
July 6th, 1853.

"Special Order No. 36.

"It is hereby ordered that one Prairie Pilot, a scout and guide on the plains and in the mountains on the Western frontier, is from this day an exile from all the forts, military posts, trading stations and settlements under my command along the border, and that should he enter any of the above-named, his life shall be the forfeit."

"Also, it is ordered, that any settler, soldier, scout, hunter, or Indians friendly to the whites harboring or aiding said Prairie Pilot shall be dealt with most severely."

"Also, for the head of Prairie Pilot, dead or alive, is offered the sum of one thousand dollars."

"By order of
ARTHUR RADCLIFF,
Colonel Commanding."

"This ought to catch him, or starve him, colonel," said Bravo Bob, with half a sneer upon his handsome face.

"That order is not all, scout, for I intend to dispatch scouts up and down the frontier to all other posts, with a special request from me that other commanding officers will issue like orders."

"That ought to get him, colonel," replied Bravo Bob, and if Colonel Radcliff saw the sneer upon the scout's face he said nothing about it; but Ruth saw it, and also read there a look of confidence in the powers of Prairie Pilot to evade all attempts to capture him, and it gave her hope.

After a few more moments of conversation Bravo Bob saluted the colonel, bowed politely to Ruth, and left the room.

Half an hour after, he left the fort, carrying with him his own traps and those left by Prairie Pilot, the exiled scout.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HERMIT CHIEF.

THE morning after the flight of the prisoners from the bandit stronghold the camp was early astir, and the relief-guard sent to the outer end of the chasm, which being a secret entrance was never considered worthy of a large force to watch and protect it.

Upon arriving at the place all was at once excitement, for the dead body of one of the guards was discovered, while his companion, pale and weary-looking, paced nervously to and fro, his rifle in hand.

"What means this?" asked Captain Ralph, who was leaving the stronghold by the chasm passage, accompanied by half a hundred of his

men, whom he was leading in chase of the train of which the Prairie Pilot had been the guide.

"It means, Captain Ralph, that I was attacked here last night, and poor Watson slain; but after a sharp skirmish I managed to drive off my foes."

"Who were they—Indians or whites?"

"They were white men. After Watson was killed I retreated into yonder gulch, and they kept me there for fully half an hour, when at last they retreated."

"Why did you not summon aid, sir?"

"How could I, captain? Watson was killed in the first charge and I was forced back into the gulch; besides, I thought you would hear the firing."

"No, the roar of the fall doubtless drowned the sound. What do you say, sir?" he continued, turning to a horseman who dashed up, having just come through the tunnel way.

"The Prairie Pilot and the girl have escaped, sir."

"A thousand furies! Is this so?"

"Yes, sir; they are not in their caves, and the rifle and arms of the scout are also gone."

Antonio disarmed the unfortunate guard, and marched him away, while Captain Ralph and his men started in rapid pursuit of the Prairie Pilot and Ruth.

Through the long chasm the guard was led by Antonio, the man who had brought the information to Captain Ralph of the escape of the prisoners, until the plateau was reached, and an excited crowd were there gathered, discussing the flight of the daring scout.

Observing that their comrade, Martin, was a prisoner, for his hands were bound, many questions were asked by the bandits; but in silence Antonio continued on his way across the plateau, to where, in a clump of trees, stood a large and comfortable-looking log cabin.

Around the house were growing a number of fragrant flowers, and around the columns that supported the piazza, running the full length of the front, were vines, entwined so as to form a shady arbor.

A wide hallway ran through the house, which had four rooms in it, those on the right side being used for sleeping, and the two on the left of the hallway were a kitchen and dining-room.

He was dressed in a blue blouse suit, and hanging upon one arm of the chair was a belt containing two revolvers and a knife.

Upon the other arm of the chair was a broad straw hat encircled by a gold cord.

Upon the little finger of his left hand glittered a single diamond of great value, and around his neck hung a huge chain of massive gold, attached to a large hunting-case watch of costly make.

Altogether he was a remarkable-looking man, and none need look to him for mercy were his inclinations against clemency.

"Ione!" he suddenly called out, in a stern, ringing voice.

"Yes, father," and the young girl, already known to the reader, came forth upon the piazza from one of the inner rooms.

"I wish you would mount Specter and make a circuit on the prairie and see if there is any trace of that train, to which the Prairie Pilot belonged, for I have more confidence in you than in all my scouts, whites and red-skins."

"Shall I go at once, father?"

"Yes—curse that fellow, I would give a good



EXAMINING THE CREVICES IN THE WALL OF ROCK, PRAIRIE PILOT FOUND ONE THAT LOOKED INTO THE ADJOINING CAVERN.

"Then there is a traitor in camp. Martin, this looks black for you," and the young leader looked suspiciously at the guard, who turned deadly pale.

"Well, we must not linger here, but strike the trail of the scout. Down the hill there, some of you, and see if you can find any traces of their flight."

Half a dozen men obeyed the order and soon returned to report that the fresh tracks of two horses were visible, and that the trail led up the valley.

"It is as I expected. Antonio!"

"Well, senor?" and a dark-faced, black-eyed Mexican rode forward and saluted.

"Take this man, Martin, back to the Hermit Chief, and relate the particulars as you know them."

"Yes, senor."

"Also say that I have gone on the trail of the prisoners, and if I find I cannot overtake them, will then branch off after the train."

"Yes, senor," and again saluting his leader,

For that out-of-the-way place, and the home of a bandit chief, the house was a most comfortable one, and neatly furnished, while its whole aspect proved that a woman's hand governed the outlaw household.

From the piazza in front a view of the plateau could be seen, with the waters rushing over the fall, the cabins of the band, and the valleys below, all together making a picturesque scene.

Upon the piazza, seated in a large and easy chair, was a striking-looking man, engaged in gazing restlessly over the scene laid out before him.

His form was large and commanding, his complexion dark, his eyes black and fiery, and his hair and beard long, and as white as snow, though his general appearance scarcely indicated that he was more than sixty years of age.

Though venerable-looking, there was not that halo in his face which frequently comes with old age and white hair; but, instead, a stern look haunted the mouth, and a restless, cruel glitter trembled in the eyes.

deal to know how he escaped. I wish I had had him shot, yesterday."

And thus the old Hermit Chief went on muttering imprecations against Prairie Pilot for half an hour before the news had been brought him of the escape of the scout and Ruth.

A few moments more and Ione dashed by on her white steed, and once more clad in her ghostly costume, which looked weird even in the bright light of the sun.

"Yes, she is true to me, and so is Ralph; but who else can I trust?"

"I am getting along in years now, and must soon give up this outlaw life, and then in some foreign capital I will luxuriate on the gold I have won."

"Gold I have in vast quantities, but not yet enough—no not enough! I must have more, and then I can live like a prince. Like a prince, did I say? Like a king I mean, for am I not king here?"

"And that girl—who can she be?"

"I certainly have seen her face before, and

last night I saw it in my dreams, over and over again.

"She is a proud and fearless creature too, for I could not intimidate her.

"And she must be the daughter of some one high in authority, or else she would have given her name; but curse that scout! I would give a score of lives for his single one," and thus the old chief muttered on, running from one subject to another, until suddenly he descried Antonio and the bound guard approaching.

"Well, who have we here? Ah! Antonio, the man I sent after Ralph with the news of the escape. Well, Antonio, what has Martin been doing that you have him bound?"

"Senor chief, the senor capitan bade me bring the guard back and tell you that his companion on duty last night was killed, and—"

"Speak, scoundrel, and answer for yourself!" yelled the infuriated old chief.

In trembling tones the frightened bandit told the same story which he had related to Captain Ralph, and when he had finished, he saw that there was no hope for him in this life.

"Antonio, bind that traitor to yonder post

Chief knew no such word as mercy, and the people of the stronghold beginning to assemble, poor Martin ceased his entreaties, and tried to become calm and indifferent to his fate.

Soon all were assembled, a motley group of men, women and children, among whom were Americans, Irish, Mexicans, Germans, negroes and Indians.

With the women were a few miserable-looking whites, some of them captives, perhaps, dragged down to a life of crime, and a few who had followed their evil husbands into outlawry; but the most of the females were Indian squaws.

In high glee, for they reveled in bloodshed, the wild crowd came together, and with eager looks feasted their appetites for the horrible upon the pale, but now calm, face of the doomed guard.

"Antonio, pick out your men, and when I give the signal let that traitor meet his just fate."

"Yes, senor."

The condemned man was then led to one side, and placed with his back toward the cliff, the crowd forming three sides of a hollow square

"What means this execution, father?" she said, hastily.

"Why have you returned so soon, Ione?" evasively answered the chief.

"I was chased back by a band of mounted Sioux—"

"Ha! how many, girl?"

"About half a hundred."

"No need for us to fear them, but—"

"Father, why has Martin been executed? He was one of the best men in the band."

"So I believed him; but he proved a traitor and aided the prisoners to escape," and the chief told Ione of the occurrence on the outpost, and the death of the other guard.

"Still he might have been innocent," urged the maiden.

"No, he stole the scout's arms from my room—"

"What! have you forgotten you made me a present of those weapons?" and Ione's face turned pale.

"By Heaven! you are right, girl. Still, I am confident that the guard was a traitor."

"I do not believe it; the escape of Prairie Pilot was certainly most mysterious; but I do



"STRUGGLE ONE INSTANT AND YOU SHALL DIE," HE CRIED, WHILE WITH HIS OTHER HAND HE HELD A PISTOL TO HIS HEAD.

—there! Now summon the people in front of my cabin, and we will get rid of one man who would betray us."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN OUTLAW EXECUTION.

ANTONIO, the Mexican, was a sub-officer under the Hermit Chief, and commanded the stronghold defenses; hence he was willing that Martin should be executed, so as to turn the tide of wrath from himself.

He therefore at once departed to obey the orders of his chief, and left alone with the old man, the doomed bandit implored for mercy, and made a full confession of the facts of the case.

But the old Hermit Chief cruelly laughed in his face, and sneered forth:

"How did he get his arms from this cabin? tell me that, sir traitor?"

"I know not, chief; I have told you the whole truth."

But in vain the man pleaded, for the Hermit

with that promptness and discipline which frequent experience in a like deadly drill had taught them.

"Now, traitor, beg for your life," called out the old Hermit Chief, still comfortably seated in his easy-chair.

"I will not give you the pleasure of hearing me beg for the life which I have made a curse to myself," firmly responded the outlaw.

"Ha! he has pluck, then. Antonio, watch my signal."

"Yes, senor."

Erect and defiant stood the condemned man, his eyes gazing as it were far into the past, and his face brave and stern.

Raising his hands, the old chief glanced first at the half-dozen riflemen, selected as the executioners, and then upon the victim.

Then with a loud clap his hands came together, and a volley of firearms followed.

Without a moan, or a word, Martin, the outlaw guard, fell dead, just as Ione dashed rapidly up, her horse covered with sweat and foam.

not believe one person in this camp aided him," and Ione entered the cabin, feeling sad at the thought that her having taken the scout's arms to him had caused the execution of a man who was doubtless guiltless of the crime of which he was charged.

Though for years the occupant of an outlaw camp, Ione was not evil at heart, for she hardly knew the enormities committed by the band, and believed rather what the old chief told her, that he and his men were a persecuted set.

Thus believing, and feeling that her father knew best, Ione did all she could for the good of the band, and in her spectral masquerade was wont to spy out the movements of trains and find out the strength of settlements, believing that it was a just war that was waged.

As she grew older she had her misgivings, and would frequently converse with her brother Ralph upon the subject; but he was wont to say:

"We were once far different, Ione, when we were mere children; but I can not remember all the past."

"Our father is kind to us, and he has been driven from civilization—why, I know not, so let us do all we can to cheer him.

"He will not last long, for he is failing, and I fear some crime rests heavy upon him.

"When he is gone we will give up this wild, outlaw life, and together seek a home where we are unknown, and can live in quiet, respected by those around us."

This conversation would cheer Ione, and, somehow, Ralph would feel better after it, for though he was a stern leader, and a dashing, fearless fellow, he had never been cruel, and seemed to shun acts of cruelty.

Of late he had been strangely remiss in leading raids, and his men wondered at the change coming over their youthful leader.

Still, he was a severe disciplinarian, and knew that his lawless band must be ruled with a hand of iron, or they would bring ruin upon themselves, and therefore there was no unbending of his nature toward his followers, who feared him almost as much as they did his grim old father.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING SURPRISE.

TRUE to his promise, Rafael Randolph, the lover of Ida Arlington, appeared in the Blue Water settlement, and was presented to his expectant father-in-law.

Old Amos Arlington thought him a little wild-looking, perhaps, but was soon won over by the genial and frank manner of the young man, and gave his consent for Ida to marry him when he should next visit the settlement, which would be in two weeks, for Rafael Randolph had business, he said, which would call him East about that time, and wished to take with him his young bride.

The two weeks rolled quickly away to the happy Ida, who was aided in her preparations for the momentous event by her friend, Ruth Radcliff, who passed a great deal of her time in the settlement, for she liked not her father's moody manner, she told her friend.

Perhaps, too, she was anxious to see Bravo Bob often also, and learn from him if he had any news of Prairie Pilot, from whom no one had heard since his flight from the fort.

But, though Bravo Bob was an untiring scout, and notwithstanding the presence of hostile Indians raiding through the country, he was continually going off alone on scouting expeditions, he could never tell her anything about his comrade.

He had even gone to the distant posts where the traders' train had safely arrived, hoping to find Prairie Pilot there; but, no: all that had been heard of the famous scout there was the bran of exile that had been passed against him, and which both Scalp-lock Dave and Yankee Sam condemned in profane terms, for they said: "He weren't the feller to be branded like a mad-dog, an' was a sight better man than the feller that did it."

It was a sad disappointment to Ruth when no news could be gained of her lover; but she would not yield to the general belief, that he had been killed by the Indians or outlaws, but hoped against hope that she would see him again.

Again, wounded or captive Indians would report that a white horseman was wont to dog them by night, and frequently ride upon their camps, pouring upon them a destructive fire from a many-shooting rifle; but that they never saw him in the daytime, and he knew not his haunts.

That this strange horseman was Prairie Pilot not only Ruth, but Bravo Bob felt confident, and they were the more convinced of it when on several occasions an arrow had been fired into the inclosure of the fort, containing a notice, or warning of some move of the Indians or outlaws, and written in a bold hand.

Neither Ruth nor Bravo Bob had ever seen Prairie Pilot's writing, but they were assured that they came from him.

What Colonel Radcliff thought none knew; but, certain it is, that when he heeded not the first silent messenger of warning, and disaster befell a squadron of his troopers, he afterward had full confidence in the others, and acted accordingly—the result of which was that serious trouble was often averted.

Promptly at the end of the two weeks Rafael Randolph again appeared in the Blue Water settlement, splendidly mounted and armed, and handsomely attired in a suit of dark-blue cloth.

He found a warm greeting from both Ida and her father, and a cordial welcome from Ruth, who had begun to like the young man more than she at first supposed she would.

Bravo Bob also took a fancy to the young trader, and the two were constantly together during the day that was to usher in the wedding-evening.

To the marriage of his daughter Amos Arlington had invited the officers and ladies of the fort, and a number of his friends among the settlers, so that his capacious cabin was filled to overflowing.

At length the expectant bride and groom entered the parlor, Bravo Bob and Ruth Radcliff having consented to act as "best man" and bridesmaid.

Ida was dressed in a neat traveling suit, and looked perfectly lovely and happy, while Ruth was also becomingly attired, and tried to appear joyful, but a sad look haunted her beautiful eyes.

The groom, whose handsome appearance was the admiration of all, was attired in his well-fitting dark suit, and yet his face was strangely stern and pale for one on the eve of marriage.

Bravo Bob, in a handsome new suit of buckskin, also came in for his share of admiration, and remarked that if he were to draw lots for either Ruth or Ida, he would be perfectly happy with whichever one he won—and so other young gallants thought, while they greatly envied Rafael Randolph.

As for Colonel Radcliff, a dark scowl rested upon his face, and in his heart he cursed Rafael Randolph, for he also had loved the beautiful Ida, and had hoped to one day make her his wife.

Within the cabin all seemed brightness and joy—without the wind howled mournfully, and a dark storm was rolling up from the eastward.

While the marriage ceremony was being performed by the chaplain of the fort, a horseman rode cautiously into the settlement, and glanced in upon the bright scene enacted at Amos Arlington's.

Suddenly he started visibly, and sprang to the ground, walking rapidly toward the cabin.

Entering the door he forced himself through the surprised crowd, and called out in a voice clear and ringing:

"Hold! This marriage is a sacrilege! *That man is Captain Ralph, the young chief of the outlaws!*"

A wild cry from Ida, a bitter imprecation from Rafael Randolph, and cries of surprise mingled with expressions of sorrow filled the room.

Then, above all, was heard the clear voice of Bravo Bob:

"Prairie Pilot, by the gods above!"

"Yes, and God knows I regret I was not here sooner to save that poor girl—Hold! Ralph, the outlaw, you cannot get away. Move one step and you shall die," and the revolver of the scout covered the breast of the young man, who, pale as death, folded his arms and stood in silence.

"Oh, say he is not an outlaw, and I will bless you! Tell me he is not such as you say," implored Ida, clasping her hands, and gazing imploringly into the scout's face.

"He is what I say, poor girl, and, Colonel Radcliff, if you will place him under arrest you shall have proof of my words within the week."

"Ay, I will put him under arrest, and you also," and Colonel Radcliff called to his officers present to rally round him.

"Back! back, I say, or, before God, some of you shall die!" and, with a revolver in each hand, Prairie Pilot backed from the room, sprung out of the cabin, and the next moment had flung himself upon his steed and was flying away like the wind, leaving behind him a scene of wildest tumult.

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNWELCOME DISCOVERY.

SEVERAL days passed after the unfortunate marriage, which had bound poor Ida Arlington to an outlaw, and still the sad affair was the general theme of conversation among the soldiers and settlers, and the maiden was pitied by all.

But, true to her love, Ida Arlington refused to believe the charge against her husband, and though he was held as a prisoner in the fort, she daily visited him, conveying with her delicacies made with her own hands.

In her sorrow Ruth gave her full sympathy, and did all she could to cheer her; but, in her heart, she felt that Rafael Randolph was none other than Captain Ralph, the young leader of the outlaw band, who acknowledged the Hermit Chief as its ruling spirit.

Though the evil tidings had been brought by the Prairie Pilot, Colonel Radcliff believed every word of it, and a hope arose in his heart that Ida might yet become his wife, when her sorrowing for her bandit-lover was over.

A week nearly had gone by since the imprisonment of Captain Ralph, and Colonel Radcliff was moodily pacing to and fro, as was his wont, in front of his quarters.

Presently an officer approached him, accompanied by a man, who led a horse by the rein.

"Well, Ashland, who have you there?"

"The bearer of private dispatches to you, colonel, he says."

"Yes, sir; I'm anthur having a lettther for yer honor, sur; an' its mighty important, I was tould to say," replied the man, who was an odd-looking but shrewd fellow, that looked as if he could take care of himself in a tight place.

Taking from an inner pocket of his well-worn suit a large envelope heavily sealed, he handed it to Colonel Radcliff, who hastily broke the seal and glanced at the contents.

Instantly his face turned deadly pale, and the young officer asked, quickly:

"Are there ill tidings, colonel?"

"No, Ashland, no; my man, I will accompany you; and, captain, you will command until my return."

"Are you going to venture out of the fort alone, sir? Shall I not order an escort for you?"

"No, captain. I am only going a short distance and will soon return."

So saying, Colonel Radcliff told his orderly to bring his horse, and ten minutes after, rode away from the fort, the strange messenger leading the way.

For two miles or more, the Irish messenger directed the way until he came to a path which led under a bluff overhanging the river.

"You will be afther finding him there, sur, under the big tree," and the Irishman came to a halt.

Without a word in reply Colonel Radcliff rode on, and soon discovered a tall form standing beneath the shadow of an overhanging tree.

It was the Hermit Chief, and his face was cold and stern.

"Well, Arthur, you have come?" said the deep tones of the old outlaw chief.

"Yes, I have come; but in God's name what do you here?" replied Colonel Radcliff, glancing suspiciously around.

"We are alone, Arthur; you need fear no intrusion. You came without an escort?"

"Yes."

"It is well—it will avoid trouble should they meet my men."

"Your men? what mean you?"

"I mean, Arthur, that changes have come to both of us since last we met. You are the commandant on this border, while I am—"

"What?" asked the officer, as the other paused.

"*The Hermit Chief!*"

"Good God! are you that monster? Have you come to that?"

"Steady, boy, steady! Your tongue has slipped its leash and goes galloping wildly."

"Yes, after I left the States, you know why, I had to plot and counterplot to keep from starving; so I came West, and circumstances made me a robber-chief."

"A fit termination to your guilty acts of years ago; but why do you seek me here? is not the bond between us severed?"

"No, Arthur, and it never can be," somewhat sadly said the Hermit Chief, and then he continued firmly:

"I came not here to ask gold of you, but to demand the release of my lieutenant, now your prisoner, for when I learned of his capture, then it was that I heard that Arthur Radcliff was the new commander of this new frontier post."

"Yes, and a short while ago you held in your power my daughter Ruth."

"Ha! now I recall the resemblance that so haunted me. Yes, she was captured by some of my men, and rescued by that arch-fiend, the Prairie Pilot; but, Arthur, I must have Ralph Randolph—"

"What! is the outlaw prisoner in my power that youth?" cried Colonel Radcliff, in surprise.

"Yes; do you think that I would allow that prize to slip through my fingers? Oh, no!"

"And the girl—"

"Is at my cabin. The two believe themselves my children—"

"My God! when will your villainies end?"

"*In the grave.*"

The deep voice of the Hermit Chief was almost reproachful as he uttered these words.

After an instant of silence, Colonel Radcliff said:

"And you desire the release of Ralph Randolph?"

"I demand it. You cannot hang him!"

"I would not wish his blood on my hands. I have been wild, perhaps, and through your influence have been guilty of acts I would not recall; but I am not wicked enough to take his life, if in my power to save him. Yet, how can it be done?"

"Easily. He was married to a young girl that really loves him. Keep less strict guard over him and she will get him out."

"It shall be done. Now our business ends, I suppose."

"No; I must ask you to be less persevering in your attacks on my band—at least while I command it, which will not be long."

"Thank God for that. Now our interview ends—"

"Not quite. I desire you to witness one of our outlaw executions."

"Indeed! Who is your victim now?" sneeringly asked the officer.

"One for whom you seem to have a deadly hatred, men tell me. We heard where he had his retreat, and I sent men there, who luckily caught him while he was fishing, and unsuspecting of danger; but his splendid horse, repeating-rifle and belt of arms they did not find."

"To whom do you refer?" somewhat impatiently asked Colonel Radcliff.

"To the *Prairie Pilot*!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE VERGE OF DEATH.

WHEN the Hermit Chief made known who was his prisoner, Colonel Radcliff started, and an exclamation of surprised pleasure escaped his lips.

"I thought it would be pleasant news to you; but darkness is coming on, and if you wish to see the *Prairie Pilot* hanged, we must hasten."

"I will go, for I wish that man out of the way. True, he has done me only kindnesses, but if he lives I feel that Ruth will become his wife in spite of all that I can do. And I am glad to have the affair taken off of my hands."

"Doubtless; but come."

"Leading the way, the Hermit Chief ascended the hill to the top of the bluff, where were visible in the gloom fully two-score of men, standing in ominous silence."

"I would not be seen by your men; I will remain here in the shadow of this tree," said Colonel Radcliff, halting.

"As you please; when the show is over, you know the way home, and we will await Ralph here. This note given to him will explain."

"I will see that he gets the note, and will do all I can to effect his escape. Farewell."

The Hermit Chief half held out his hand, but withdrew it instantly with a bitter laugh, and walked toward the group standing some hundred yards away.

In the midst of that group was *Prairie Pilot*, his face pale and stern, his form erect, his eyes flashing defiance upon his foes.

As the Hermit Chief had said, he had been surprised while fishing in the river for his evening meal, and when armed with only one revolver and knife.

But he made a brave resistance, and it was only after a desperate struggle that he was secured.

That his retreat was not far away his captors knew; but search as they might, no trace of it could be found, and they were compelled to come away with their prisoner, without having found his famous steed, or secured his famous rifle and belt of arms.

When the Hermit Chief advanced, there was a noose around the neck of *Prairie Pilot*, and the rope that was to drag him up to an ignominious death was thrown already across the limb of a tree above his head.

Thus far the Hermit Chief had not seen his prisoner, his capture having been reported to him while he was waiting for the coming of Colonel Radcliff, and with some curiosity he walked forward and gazed into the noble, handsome face of the scout.

Involuntarily an exclamation of surprise arose to his lips; but it was checked by the manner of *Prairie Pilot*, whose eyes flashed fire, and face became livid, while every vein on his forehead stood out like cords.

Startled by his emotion, the chief stepped back, and sternly ordered:

"String him up! and quickly, too, or the devil may yet aid in his escape."

A dozen men seized the end of the rope, and running off with it, the splendid form of *Prairie Pilot* was the next moment dangling in the air, the handsome face black with rage and pain.

Quickly the end of the rope was made fast to a small sapling, and a cheer broke from the crowd of bandits, as they felt that at last their untiring enemy was beyond doing them further injury.

But as the cheer ended, a rapid rattle of rifle-shots came from over the bluff, and several outlaws fell dead in their tracks.

Instantly there was the wildest excitement, and mounting in hot haste, while, believing that they were attacked by a body of troops, they dashed off at full speed, the Hermit, Chief at their head.

As they disappeared in the gloom of the timber, a horseman rode by like the wind, his steed springing over the dead bodies of the outlaws, and his knee brushing against the swaying body of *Prairie Pilot*—the horseman was Colonel Arthur Radcliff, riding with all speed toward the fort, and leaving the ghastly scene behind him.

CHAPTER XVII.

COLONEL RADCLIFF'S STRATEGY.

WITH a feeling at his heart which he could not account for, a sensation of joy that the hanging of the *Prairie Pilot* had been shifted from his conscience, and a joy that the scout was no longer an obstacle to some ambitious idea he had for Ruth, Colonel Radcliff stood watching the outlaw execution of the brave man whom he had exiled from the border.

The sudden firing caused him hastily to spring into his saddle, and with surprise at the sudden and unexpected attack, he dashed away, for he did not care to be caught in such company.

His path led him by the hanging scout, and he shuddered as the body swung against him and the staring eyes looked down into his own.

"God in heaven! I can never forget that look," he cried, and he buried his spurs deep into the sides of his horse and rushed on.

Now and then he heard a shot behind him, back by the bluff; but he soon felt safe, and in ten minutes more drew up at the gate of the fort.

It was quite dark by the time he arrived, but the sentinel recognized his voice, and quickly opened the gate.

Riding up to his quarters he threw his rein to his orderly, and entered the cabin where sat Ruth and Ida, the latter weeping bitterly.

"Miss Ida, I would like to see you for a moment. Will you come with me into my office?" he said, kindly.

In surprise Ida arose, and entering the room, the colonel motioned her to a seat.

"Miss Ida, I wished to see you alone, because I am going to place myself in your power, as it were."

Ida made no reply, only looked up with surprise, and the colonel continued:

"You certainly were most unfortunate in bestowing your love upon one who so grossly deceived you—but marriage is a lottery, and it is only after we enter upon it that we find out whether we have drawn a prize or a blank."

"But it is not my intention to moralize, but to act. Though you refused my love, I feel no ill-will, Ida, as I will prove."

"That you love, with your whole heart, your outlaw husband—"

"He is no outlaw, Colonel Radcliff—"

"Alas, I know all that he is, Ida; but we will not argue that point; yet, certain it is, that if he remains here, he will have to die an ignominious death, and I wish to save him."

"You, Colonel Arthur Radcliff, wish to save the life of one whom you say you *know* to be an outlaw chief?"

"We will do much for those we love, Ida; but I do wish, for your sake, to save Captain Ralph, as he is called—are you brave enough to effect his escape?"

"Oh, try me, and I will bless you."

"I will try you. His horse is at your father's, is he not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well; now you can remain in this room, after I leave, and in yonder closet you will find one of my cloaks and a slouch hat—carry them in some way to the prisoner, and when you hear me talking with the sentinel outside the guard-house, both of you leave and come hither; when it gets later, I will walk with you out of the inclosure, passing you by the sentinel, who will think your companion some of the officers seeing you home."

"Oh! Colonel Radcliff, how can I thank you for this kindness?"

"By keeping my part in the affair an inviolate secret; but here, give this to your husband. It is a note from the old Hermit Chief."

Ida turned a shade paler, and held forth her

hand for the note, which the officer handed to her.

"Now, Miss Ida, I will leave you. Be brave, be cool, and all will go well."

With a beating heart Ida seized the hat and cloak, and concealing them under her dress, she walked quickly to the guard-house, located in an isolated portion of the stockade inclosure, and guarded by a single sentinel, who, recognizing her, permitted her to enter, for such had been the colonel's orders.

"Well, Stockton, how is your prisoner?" said Colonel Radcliff, approaching the sentinel, a few moments after the maiden had entered the small cabin.

"All right, sir."

"Stockton, what sound is that I hear in the timber?"

"I hear no sound, sir," replied the guard.

"Your ears are dull; come around here out of the wind and listen."

The sentinel at once obeyed, and after listening awhile, said:

"It's from the settlement, sir—the settlers are having a good time, I guess."

"Yes, the sound must come from the settlement. Good-night, Stockton," and Colonel Radcliff walked away, for when he came round in front of the guard-house, he beheld two forms some distance away hurrying toward his quarters.

An hour later, and Colonel Radcliff was walking moodily back from the stockade gate, while Ida and the escaped prisoner were hurrying rapidly toward the settlement.

As he reached his quarters, the relief guard approached, and in their midst was the sentinel, Stockton, his face white and scared.

"What is it, sergeant?"

"The prisoner has escaped, sir."

"Ha! when did this happen?"

"I do not know, I looked in when I relieved the guard just now, and the guard-house was empty," said the sergeant.

"Why, it is not an hour since I was there—was he within then, Stockton?"

"Yes, sir, I heard him speak to the lady, whom I passed in just before you came up sir."

"By heaven! I have it—I called Stockton from his post for a moment or two, and they doubtless took that opportunity to escape, and a short while since I passed the lady, and a person I supposed to be some escort from the settlement, out of the gate."

"Release Stockton, sergeant, for it is my fault and not his. Send Captain Ashland to me at once."

So saying, Colonel Radcliff entered his quarters, and a few moments after the young captain arrived.

"Ashland, through a blunder of mine, it seems that the prisoner, Captain Ralph, has escaped, and I wish you to take your company and go in pursuit. If you do not find him at the settlement, you had better return, for I do not wish you far away in these times."

The young officer obeyed his orders, and two hours after returned to report that Ida was at home, but that no trace of the prisoner could be found.

Colonel Radcliff appeared to be annoyed at his blunder, which had allowed his prisoner to escape; but, at heart, he rejoiced over the success of his strategy, and the able manner in which Ida had carried it out.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FRIENDS TO THE FRONT.

WHEN *Prairie Pilot* stood before his captors, bound hand and foot, and with the hangman's noose around his neck, he at last felt that his doom had come, for he saw no possible means of escape.

Ere he expected, he was suddenly drawn bodily into the air, and all seemed dark before him; but the rope was so twisted that the slip-knot got under his chin, and, still clinging to life, he pressed his chin with such force upon it, as to prevent its slipping down and choking him.

Still his strength would soon give way, and also he was strangled considerably by the pressure of the rope on the veins of his neck.

Just at this moment he heard the rattle of rifle-shots, and a few loud yells, and, a moment after, his eyes met those of Colonel Radcliff, rushing by.

Then a darkness came over him; there was a roaring in his ears; his strength failed; the noose tightened around his neck, and he knew no more.

When he again opened his eyes, it was some moments before he could collect his senses, and he then saw that he lay with his feet toward a bright fire, and kneeling upon each side of him

were two forms—the one a maiden, the other a man, while two more forms stood erect beside the fire.

The glassy film over his eyes soon passed away, and he first recognized Bravo Bob, who was briskly rubbing his neck; then his gaze fell upon the maiden—it was Ione, the Phantom Spy!

With surprise he then turned his eyes upon the men at the fire; one was Yankee Sam, the other Scalp-lock Dave.

With a violent effort he suddenly raised himself from his recumbent position, while Bravo Bob warmly ejaculated, "Thank God!"

"Yes, and you, too, I have to thank—for you have saved my life; now I remember all," said Prairie Pilot, speaking with some difficulty, for his throat pained him severely.

"You must not talk, old fellow, yet awhile; but listen, and I will tell you all," and Bravo Bob offered the scout a flask of liquor, from which he took a good draught, and then silently offered his hand to Sam, Dave and the maiden.

"You see," began Bravo Bob, "I ran upon a heavy trail, and tracking it up, I suddenly met with Yankee and Dave, here, who were on their way to the fort to offer for service in the Indian war."

"Of course we were all glad to meet each other, and I proposed we should follow the trail together, which we did."

"We had not gone far before we ran upon this young lady, whom I at once recognized as the Phantom Spy, and before she could get away, I lassoed her horse, and we made her prisoner."

"Well, we rode on up the river, the trail growing fresher, and just about dark we heard a cheer, and a moment after came upon a sight that made us wild with rage."

"That sight was the best man on these prairies hanging by the neck, and a score of outlaw cutthroats dancing around him."

"We didn't stop to count noses, but let in lively with our rifles and revolvers, and, hang me, if the whole party didn't make tracks."

"While the scare was upon them we dashed in, cut you down, and here you are as good as new, after a short rest."

"Yes, to you I owe my life, my friends: but where are we, Bob?"

"About five miles from the fort—in the Antelope valley."

"You have crossed the river, then and are in the hill country?"

"Yes; we did not like to camp near your friends, the outlaws."

"A wise conclusion; but, Bob, you must do me another favor."

"Name it, Prairie Pilot."

"Give this maiden into my charge: now I cannot tell you why."

"I will."

"Thank you: now let us camp here for the night; and in the morning, Sam, you and Dave can go on to the fort; but I am going to beg that you will not mention having seen me, my rescue from death, or that you know anything about me."

"I'll be as quiet as a church on week days, you bet; but I'm all-fired glad yer ain't a dead man, I is," said Yankee Sam, while Scalp-lock Dave replied:

"An' so is I. You see, pard, the times is dull now for guides, so we just struck over to the fort to raise Injun ha'r for the soldiers; but it's a darnation shame that sich a man as you be is hunted like a dog; but you'll ever find me yer friend."

"I know it, Dave, and some day I hope to prove how I appreciate the friendship of yourself and Sam."

Feeling that they would have a better chance to safely reach the fort in the darkness, Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave expressed their determination to at once set out; so, bidding farewell to Prairie Pilot and his companions, they mounted their horses and rode away.

"Now let us go to my retreat, Bob. Though I could trust Sam and Dave, I could not let them know that secret—"

"Can you trust the girl?" asked Bravo Bob, in a whisper.

"With my life. Come."

A few moments more and the trio were on their way, Prairie Pilot having accepted Ione's invitation to a seat with her on Specter, and which the noble animal seemed to care little for.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PRAIRIE FIGHT.

THREE weeks passed after the hanging of Prairie Pilot by the outlaws, and the escape of

Captain Ralph. Daily matters were becoming more complicated upon the border, for the Indians had taken to the war-path along the whole line, and the settlements were hourly in fear of an attack.

Squadrons of cavalry frequently scouted through the hills and upon the prairies, and often returned with accounts of hard-fought battles with bands of red-skins, and a gloom fell upon all.

With untiring zeal and undaunted courage Colonel Radcliff met every danger and overcame it, and Captain Ashland daily won golden laurels for his fearless attacks against the Indians.

Of the escape of Captain Ralph little was said after Ida boldly admitted that she had been the means of his escape, taking advantage of the colonel's talk with the sentinel to leave the guard-house.

Since his leaving the fort nothing had been heard of the young outlaw chief; but his band were daily on the war-path against the settlements, led on by the old Hermit Chief, who suddenly seemed to have gained new vigor and health.

Whether Captain Ralph had returned to the stronghold, or given up the life of an outlaw, the scouts and spies could not discover.

Upon comparatively friendly terms with the hostile tribes of Indians, the Hermit Chief could raid along the border with impunity, well knowing that the line of forts were kept busy with their red foes, and with almost savage ferocity he brought ruin upon many a settler's home, and left many a ghastly corpse behind his deadly trail.

The troops commanded by Colonel Radcliff and the settlers of Blue Water settlement, the Hermit Chief seemed ever to shun, and on several occasions had his whole band fallen back before a small squadron, under the gallant Ashland, until the troopers of the fort began to believe that they were invincible, and put on airs accordingly.

At the request of the officers of the fort, and the settlers, Bravo Bob had become chief of scouts, and with Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave for his "borders," he had organized a most formidable band of bold spirits, that were sudden death to Indians and outlaws whenever they met them.

Frequently Bravo Bob would leave the fort at night, alone, and not return till near daylight.

Where he went none knew, but certain it is that he always had gained some important information in those solitary scouting trips.

Soon rumors began to come that the outlaw band had a deadly foe upon their trail—one who seemed to dog them only by night, when in their camp they would suddenly be aroused by the ring of a rifle, and the doom of some one of the guards around the encampment was sealed.

So frequently had these midnight attacks of their mysterious foe occurred that a number of bandits had fallen, and a nervous dread of sudden death seemed to pervade their ranks.

Who this mysterious enemy could be none knew, and as the Indians also had heard his rifle's death-knell, and felt his vengeance, a superstitious horror seemed to fall upon red-skin and outlaw alike.

From settlement to settlement, from fort to fort, flew the news of his deadly hunt for human game, until around the mess-tables, at the hearth-stone and in the camp his deeds were the subject of conversation and all wondered who the terrible slayer could be.

Many believed him to be the Prairie Pilot, but as no one could tell aught of that famous scout since the night he exposed Captain Ralph, it was doubted by numbers, for he was supposed to have been killed.

Upon the subject of the mysterious avenger there were four persons who usually kept silent, and seldom expressed an opinion.

These four were Ruth Radcliff, Bravo Bob, Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave—a quartette who, if they had a secret, knew well how to keep it.

Early in the month of September a horseman was seen coming across the prairie at full speed, a hundred Indians at his back, and endeavoring to see who could gain the honor of raising his hair.

Out from the fort dashed Bravo Bob and his score of scouts, hunters and guides, and the Indians were checked by a well-aimed volley of rifle-bullets.

While the horseman continued on toward the fort, Bravo Bob went into line of battle and commenced an open prairie fight with the red-skins, and being supported by a squadron of

troopers, under the gallant Ashland, an animated combat at once began.

Though the Indians put on a bold front and their chief handled them well, they were soon put to flight, and with wild yells the victorious whites followed them to return an hour after with many a gory scalp as a war-trophy.

CHAPTER XX.

AN OUTLAW'S LETTER.

THE horseman, who had not deemed it his duty to join in the fight against his pursuers, rode on to the fort and begged to see Colonel Radcliff.

He was sent to the quarters of the commandant, who beheld in him the same man who had before brought him a message from the old Hermit Chief, and his face turned a shade paler as he held forth his hand for the letter the messenger drew from his pocket.

As he was turning to enter his room, the son of Erin spoke up, briskly:

"Yer honor's pardon, but I've had a sharp race and a big scare for my skulp, an' a wee bit of whisky would be after preventing the courage of ould Ireland from oozing clane out of me boots, yer honor's honor."

"Orderly, give the man a dram and some food," said the colonel, and he ascended to the house-top on which was a look-out, from which he had a fine view of the prairie and the preparations for battle.

Glancing keenly at the combatants, he then broke the seal of his letter and read:

"OUTLAW STRONGHOLD, September 15th, —."

"ARTHUR:

"I write to inform you that the Prairie Pilot is not dead."

"True, I had him hung; but you remember we were attacked—I believed then by your troops, so I gave orders for a hasty retreat."

"Finding we were not pursued, I returned to the spot we had fled from, to find that the scout had been cut down."

"All was silent around there, and no trace of who had been the attacking party."

"Still I believed the scout to be dead, and when, shortly before midnight, Ralph arrived, thanks to your kindness, we at once departed for the stronghold."

"Arriving here, a grief fell upon me, for Ione was missing, having left, so my lieutenant told me, to follow our trail, and endeavor to rescue her brother."

"I have sent spies and scouts everywhere on the border, but no tidings of her can be gained, and I fear she has been killed and scalped by the red-skins."

"If I was certain of it, I would leave the border, for upon her coming of age, or death, you know, hangs a fortune."

"As this Indian war has stopped emigration westward, you know I have to raid on the settlements, for we must make a living; but you will admit that I have let you and your district severely alone—nay, we have not struck back again when your men, under that dashing young Ashland, have hit us hard."

"As for Ralph, he is no longer the gallant chief he was, and will not lead the men upon raids; indeed, he even opposes raiding; so I've taken to the saddle again. I believe the girl he married so slyly, and your kindness in saving his neck, have made a fool of him—as if it were not right to divide the riches of this world equally."

"Now, to another cross which I have to bear, added to the cessation of Western emigration, the loss of Ione, and help of Ralph: there is a deadly foe upon the trail of my band, *hunting us to death*."

"Night after night we feel his deadly stroke, and rapidly our ranks are thinned by this monster."

"More yet, it is none other than the Prairie Pilot—the man I hoped and believed was in his grave."

"The fellow is too quick for us, try as we can to get him; and now I have set my whole band to returning the compliment and hunting him."

"But it does no good—they *hunt* him, and he *finds* them."

"More than a score of times he could have killed me; but he refrains from so doing, keeping me, I suppose, for a kind of dessert, after he has made soup-meat of the whole band; a *relishing* thought, very!"

"Now I wish to propose to you to draw your dogs of war off my trail, and I will pledge myself to catch and hang Prairie Pilot, ere autumn tinges the forests."

"I propose this, as his haunts are in your vicinity, and, friendly as I am with the Indians, I can soon run the Pilot aground, if no little misunderstandings occur between your men and mine."

"What say you?"

"Return answer by bearer."

"Yours in affection, as men call me, 'THE HERMIT CHIEF.'"

When he had finished reading the above letter, Colonel Radcliff wrote on it with a lead-pencil, simply:

"I am glad to feel that the Prairie Pilot is not dead. From the first I treated him unjustly, and it is my intention to recall the brand of exile against him. His gallant services against the Indians and outlaws shall win him a pardon for shooting down the two troopers, for I am more to blame in that matter than was the scout."

"With you I wish no quarrel, and it is not becom-

ing in me to advise you; but against all other outlaws on this border I intend to wage a relentless war.

ARTHUR.

Calling his orderly, he sealed the envelope, and bade him give it to the messenger, and tell him to return with it as soon as his horse was sufficiently rested to travel.

Then Colonel Radcliff called Ruth, and together they watched the battle out upon the prairie.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SECRET RETREAT.

THOUGH there was considerable stir in the fort and settlement, over the battle that had just been fought, there was a calm resting upon the scene of combat, as the outlaw courier rode slowly from the stockade, and started upon his return to the stronghold in the hills.

As he rode along, many eyes were watching him from the fort and settlement, and were surprised to see him suddenly put spurs to his horse and dash away at full speed.

The cause of this sudden move on the part of the outlaw was soon evident, when over a distant roll of the prairie a horseman dashed into view.

"The Prairie Pilot! The Prairie Pilot!" yelled a dozen voices, and also recognizing that his game was the outlaw courier, Colonel Radcliff, from his house-top, where he still sat, enjoying the balmy afternoon, called out:

"After him, Bob! After him, and tell him to spare that messenger."

Bravo Bob sprang into his saddle, and calling to Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave to follow, he dashed out upon the prairie.

In the mean time Prairie Pilot, having urged Racer into a sweeping gallop, was rapidly overhauling the outlaw, swift as was his long, wiry steed.

Presently the outlaw turned in his saddle and opened fire with his rifle upon his pursuers.

Instantly Racer came to a sudden halt, up went the glittering rifle of Prairie Pilot—a puff of smoke, and ere the report reached the ears of the lookers-on, the outlaw reeled and fell from his saddle.

A moment after Prairie Pilot dismounted and stood beside the man he had slain.

A short while he remained there, and then springing into his saddle once more rode slowly toward Bravo Bob and the two guides who were approaching.

"Hello, old fellow, you have finished one of the colonel's couriers," cried Bravo Bob, as he rode up.

"I have killed an outlaw, Bob, and made a discovery; now I will not tell you what it is, but I desire you, Sam and Dave, to come to the retreat to-night, and come prepared for work."

"Also, say to Colonel Radcliff that I will myself return him the dispatches I have captured, and that he need have no fear."

"Remember, I shall expect you to-night."

So saying, Prairie Pilot waved his hand to Yankee and Scalp-lock, who just then rode up, and dashed away across the prairie, while Bravo Bob and his comrades returned to the fort, the former making his report to Colonel Radcliff, who seemed considerably disturbed thereby.

Shortly after nightfall Bravo Bob, Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave rode from the stockade, going upon a scout, they said.

A gallop of an hour brought them to the foothills, and, as if thoroughly acquainted with the way to the secret retreat of Prairie Pilot, Bravo Bob rode rapidly on until he came to a small stream running through a deep gorge.

Into this the scouts urged their horses for a quarter of a mile, when it emptied into a larger stream, which ran swiftly through high and precipitous banks.

Though the water of this stream came up to the saddle-girths, Bravo Bob rode boldly in, and going with the current, continued on until the creek was overhung on each side, by lofty bluffs, and roared through its narrow banks, forming shallow, but foaming rapids.

But the horses held their footing, although Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave several times thought they were gone.

After ten minutes hard battling with the stream, Bravo Bob disappeared in what seemed the very wall of rock; but his comrades soon beheld a small and narrow chasm, into which they quickly followed their leader.

To their surprise they found themselves in a small, but fertile valley, with high hills overhanging it upon all sides, and a growth of trees sheltering it.

Beneath the hoofs of their horses was a carpet

of velvet grass, and near the opening toward the river bubbled up a spring of clear water.

"Wal, this is a' off-shoot o' Paradise, I guess, from their way it looks ter-night," said Yankee Sam.

"You bet; ther must be angels round heur," put in Scalp-lock Dave, and Bravo Bob felt that he had hit the truth pretty well, for he knew of one not far away, who was an angel in his eyes.

"Comrades, I am glad you are pleased with my home; you are welcome."

At the stern, deep voice breaking upon their ears, all started; but the next moment Prairie Pilot stepped out from the shadow of a tree and greeted them.

"Come with me to my cabin, and in the meantime give your steeds a feast," continued Prairie Pilot, and the horses were at once turned loose to graze, while all four men walked up through the timber toward a small cabin, through the open door of which streamed a bright light.

The cabin was built of rough logs, had two rooms, a spacious fire-place in one, which seemed to be used as the sleeping apartment of the scout, and the kitchen and dining-room combined, for there were culinary utensils around, a table was set out with a tempting supper of coffee, bread, buffalo-steaks and fish thereon, while in one corner of the room was a rude bed, above which hung a rifle, several revolvers and a knife.

Before the fire, watching the broiling of a steak, was Ione, once known as the Phantom Spy, and though she bowed pleasantly to Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave, she held forth her hand to Bravo Bob, while a blush stole over her beautiful face.

"Now, comrades, we will have some supper, and then I will tell you my plan for playing a bold game, but one which I think will be successful, for you know that I have cause to hate the outlaws, and I am determined to hunt them to the bitter end."

CHAPTER XXII.

A BOLD VENTURE.

THE second day after the three scouts sought the secret retreat of Prairie Pilot, the old Hermit Chief was pacing nervously up and down the piazza of his cabin home.

Suddenly he discovered Antonio approaching on foot, while by his side was a horseman, mounted upon a wiry-looking steed.

The appearance of the horseman as he rode up attracted the attention of the Hermit Chief, for he was a superb-looking specimen of manhood, well formed, and with a dark, handsome face.

His mustache was dark and exceedingly long, his hair hung far down upon his shoulders, while his eyes were black and piercing.

He was dressed in buckskin, and was well armed.

"Who have you there, Antonio?"

"A courier to see you, chief."

"Ha! Come up here, my man. From whence do you come?"

"From the fort at Blue Water settlement, sir; this letter will explain all," and the courier placed in the hands of the Hermit Chief a sealed envelope, which he seized, broke open, and read half-aloud, so that the contents were audible:

"BLUE WATER POST, September 16th,—

"TO THE HERMIT CHIEF:

"Your Irish courier having come to grief, I return this by one of my own scouts.

"To come to any arrangement regarding a truce between us, I must see you in person, so that a contract, which I will then explain, can be signed, not only by myself, but also by you and Captain Ralph.

"I have reason to believe that Ione is in the power of the parties who cut down the Prairie Pilot, and that she is concealed somewhere in the neighborhood of this fort.

"As I follow the bearer of this, he will conduct you to a spot not far from your stronghold, where we can meet and talk unrestrained.

"With me I shall have but two persons, and you can bring a like number, if you so desire; but I would prefer not to be seen by any one else than Captain Ralph and yourself, and you must see the propriety of my wish.

ARTHUR."

"When did you leave Blue Water, scout?" asked the Hermit Chief.

"Before day this morning, sir."

"And how far from here is the place of rendezvous appointed by your colonel?"

"About five miles; you can easily go there and back before dark, sir."

"Oh, yes. He has three men with him, has he?"

"No, sir; there are but four of us, including myself."

"You know the contents of this letter, do you?"

"I just heard you read it, sir."

"Indeed? I am absent-minded; but tell me what befell poor Irish?"

"Your courier was killed, sir; he was chased toward the fort by a band of a hundred Indians, and a battle followed, for a party of scouts and troopers went out to his rescue."

"Aha! well, I will go with you, and at once."

So saying the Hermit Chief entered his cabin and in twenty minutes after came out, ready for riding.

A moment after two fine horses were led round by a negro servant, and Captain Ralph also coming out the party mounted and rode off, the scout from the fort leading the way.

After a ride of five miles the trail crossed a small prairie and led into a piece of timber.

Into the *motte* the three rode; but, hardly had the shadow of the timber fallen upon them, when the scout suddenly seized the bridle-rein of the Hermit Chief, and leveled a revolver at his head, while he hissed forth:

"Move one inch and I will kill you."

The old chief turned deadly pale and roared out:

"Shoot the traitor down, Ralph."

"Pardon me, I am in the same trap as yourself," recklessly replied the young chief, and he spoke the truth, for Bravo Bob held a pistol to his head, while Yankee Sam had seized his bridle-rein.

"Scalp-lock, just relieve these gentlemen of their weapons," said the courier scout.

"Who are you?" yelled the Hermit Chief, livid with rage, as Scalp-lock took his weapons from him; but his question was to the man who had led him into the trap.

"Men call me the Prairie Pilot."

The answer came low, but distinct, and a tremor shook the frame of the old Chief, while Captain Ralph turned a quick glance upon the famous scout.

"Now, comrades, you know what to do with the prisoners, and as soon as we have exchanged suits once more, Bob, we must be off."

So saying, Prairie Pilot—who having shaved off his magnificent beard was hardly recognizable—retired with Bravo Bob to a clump of bushes, and the two soon reappeared in their proper attire.

Having received their prisoners, the whole party then mounted and set forth at a rapid gallop, Bravo Bob riding the white steed, Specter, which Ione had presented to him.

Taking the trail toward the Blue Water settlement, they pushed on rapidly, and after a short rest during the night, drew near the fort toward daybreak.

Here Prairie Pilot bade his companions farewell, and, while he continued on toward the fort, Bravo Bob and the remainder of the party branched off for the secret retreat in the hills.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ATTACK.

"THE Prairie Pilot would see you, sir."

"By Heaven! the Prairie Pilot," cried Colonel Radcliff, springing up from the table where he was breakfasting with Ruth, who turned deadly pale at the news brought by the orderly.

It was true; the Prairie Pilot had boldly ridden into the fort and dismounted before the headquarters of the man who had exiled him from the border, and offered a reward for his head, dead or alive!

Dismayed at the fearlessness of the famous scout, the denizens of the fort stood around gazing upon the intrepid man, and wondering what would come next in their frontier drama.

"Scout, you are bold to thus place yourself in my power," said Colonel Radcliff, quietly, greatly to Ruth's surprise.

"I have not done so without a purpose, sir; will you hear what I have to say?" calmly said Prairie Pilot.

"Assuredly; come in."

"Colonel Radcliff, I have come to tell you that the man I killed in front of your fort was an outlaw, and against all such I wage a deadly war. Upon him I found communications, the contents of which you well know."

"Acting upon them I bade Bravo Bob, Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave meet me at my retreat in the hills, and without telling them the contents of the letter I had, I arranged with them a plan for the capture of the Hermit Chief and Captain Ralph—"

"It cannot be done, scout."

"Pardon me, colonel; it has been done."

"What! those two men have been captured by you?" cried the officer, in evident alarm.

"Yes, sir, they are now prisoners in my re-

treat, under the guard of the three scouts I before mentioned. But listen, Colonel Radcliff, until you hear all.

"To get the old Chief and his son in my power, I wrote him an answer to his note, purporting to come from you, and, as I am a good penman, I imitated your writing, and the bait took, the two outlaws leaving their stronghold in my company, whom they believed to be one of your scouts, for I went there in disguise.

"Expecting to meet you they were unsuspecting until they were made prisoners.

"Now, colonel, that the two chiefs are out of danger of death, for I have my own reasons for desiring them to live, I will start within the hour with a squadron to attack the robber stronghold, and will pledge myself to lead your troopers into their camp before they are discovered.

"Upon my return I would have you and your daughter accompany me to my retreat, for I have a story to tell in which not only yourself, but Miss Ruth are deeply interested."

"Scout, I believe you in all that you have told me, and I will trust you; but first, let me say that I remove the brand of exile against you, and freely do I ask you to forgive my unkindness of the past."

"All is forgiven, colonel. Now will you let me have the troopers?"

"Yes; Ashland shall accompany you with a picked company of seventy-five men."

"That number will be sufficient, sir."

"I will at once give the order. In the meantime go into the other room, and Ruth will give you some breakfast."

Gladly the Prairie Pilot obeyed the last order. Again meeting Ruth gave him a good appetite for his meal, served as it was by the fairy fingers of the lovely maiden.

An hour after the squadron rode from the fort, Captain Ashland and Prairie Pilot galloping side by side to the delight of all, for the officers and men were rejoiced to see the scout once more in favor at head-quarters.

After a long, hard ride the hills wherein was the bandit stronghold loomed up before the anxious troopers, who, just at midnight, halted at the foot of the hill, where Bravo Bob had left the horses the night he had aided Prairie Pilot and Ruth to escape.

"Follow me slowly up the hill; I will go first," and the scout ran on ahead.

Creeping cautiously up the steep hillside, he soon came in view of the mouth of the tunnel, before which was pacing to and fro the dark form of a guard.

The moon, on the wane, was just rising above the tree-tops of the mountain, and shed a bright light upon the sentinel.

In his hand the Prairie Pilot carried a bow and arrow, and quietly fitting the latter to the string he raised the weapon, took a quick aim, and the outlaw guard fell dead, pierced through the heart.

Springing forward he was confronted by a tall form, just rising from his blanket-bed, alarmed by the fall of his companion.

In an instant Prairie Pilot was upon him, and then followed the death-rattle in the throat of the outlaw, for the scout's knife had sunk deep into his heart.

A moment after Captain Ashland and his troopers arrived, and again mounting Racer, Prairie Pilot led the way into the tunnel through the chasm.

Like a huge, long snake the line filed, until soon they came out upon the plateau—the interior of the stronghold had been gained without an alarm.

Then, long and loud, fierce and thrilling, rung out the war-cries of the troops and scouts, and the attack began!

In dismay the bandits rushed from their cabins, to be shot down mercilessly, and with their leaders gone they became panic-stricken, and fled for their lives.

An hour of carnage and the fight was over—the stronghold was won.

Leaving a proper force to garrison the place and secure the horses, stock, and booty of the outlaws, also to look after the wounded, Captain Ashland at once started upon his return with the bandit prisoners, guarded by some twenty troopers.

Returning with him was Prairie Pilot, who carried a large tin box which he had taken from the cabin of the old Hermit Chief.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PRAIRIE PILOT'S STORY.

IN the cabin home of Prairie Pilot, the second evening after the fall of the outlaw strong-

hold, were gathered several persons, bending over a form reclining upon the scout's rude cot.

The recumbent figure was the old Hermit Chief, and his face was pallid, his brow damp with the approach of death, for an ugly wound in his side was dripping out his sands of life.

Bending over him were Bravo Bob, Scalp-lock Dave, Yankee Sam, Captain Ralph and Ione—the two latter with pale, saddened faces.

"Yes, you have done for me; I have not long to live, and your cursed bullet has ruined my every dream of the future," groaned the Hermit Chief, turning his burning eyes upon Yankee Sam, who replied:

"I'm sorry, pard, durned if I ain't; but yer was about makin' tracks, yer know, so I let yer have the contents of ole Heart-seeker, an' she's a weapon as don't say fail, often. I'm as sorry as tho' it wur my own mother-in-law, durned if I ain't."

"Well, as you have given me my death-wound, curse you, go to the fort and tell Colonel Radcliff I would see him; and quick, or it will be too late."

Yankee Sam started quickly to obey, but at the door started back, for on the threshold stood Prairie Pilot, Colonel Radcliff, Amos Arlington, his daughter Ida, and Ruth, who had just arrived.

"Hal! the Hermit Chief ill?" cried the scout, catching sight of the recumbent form.

"He's done for, pard—he went to slip, an' I gi'n him a pill from ole Heart-seeker, an' it done the biz."

Prairie Pilot sprang past Yankee Sam, and with an exclamation of horror Colonel Radcliff rushed forward, crying: "My God! has it at last come to this? Would to Heaven I had been spared this sad scene."

"Arthur, thank God you have come, for I would see you ere I die—oh, God! this bullet is burning up my very vitals."

"Be calm, sir; your talking causes you greater suffering: what you would say, I can say for you, and if I err you can speak," said the stern, deep voice of Prairie Pilot.

"Who are you that dares to say he knows aught of me?"

"Listen, and you shall hear, for I have a story to tell that interests nearly all present."

"Will you hear me, chief?"

"Yes; but my life is ebbing fast, and—"

"I will not linger in my recital," and in his deep, clear tones, Prairie Pilot began his story, his piercing eyes bent upon the old Hermit Chief.

"Eighteen years ago, there lived on a plantation home in a south-western State, a gentleman by the name of Herbert Lyndon.

"His family consisted at that time of his wife and two sons, the elder, named after his father, twelve years of age, and the youngest a mere infant of three years.

"Into the neighborhood there came a physician, a widower, with a son of twenty years of age.

"Commencing to practice his profession, the physician was soon doing well, for he was generally very popular.

"Among his most intimate friends were Mr. Lyndon and his wife, who respected and regarded him most highly, and through the influence of the planter, the son got an appointment in the army.

"Other than to say that the youth was a good soldier, though a little wild, and ran off and married a young school-girl, I have nothing more now to relate of the son; but of the father I have much to tell.

"When Mrs. Lyndon gave birth to a little girl, the man I speak of was the attendant physician, and doubtless his skill saved her life. Better had it been had she died then, for, ere she recovered her former good health, her husband sickened and died suddenly.

"It was a terrible blow to the loving wife; but, in all her sorrows and troubles, her physician was her devoted friend, and so kind did he seem, and so noble, that in a little more than one year after the death of her husband, she married the man, whom she had really learned to love.

"Shortly after his mother's second marriage, Herbert the eldest son, was sent to Europe to finish his education, his stepfather so desiring.

"Several years passed away, and one night an attack was made on the gentle Herbert by an assassin; but the would-be murderer had not calculated his victim's remarkable strength, and was made a prisoner by the man he would have slain.

"With surprise, the young man discovered his intended murderer to be an American, a

wild boy, the son of his late father's plantation overseer.

"Inquiry caused the truth to come out—the young man had been hired to kill Herbert Lyndon, his employer being the man he had loved next to his own father.

"To escape being handed over to the authorities, the young man confessed all, and at once Herbert Lyndon set sail for America, accompanied by his intended assassin.

"Arriving at home a terrible blow fell upon him, for he found his mother dead, and stepfather gone, carrying with him his little brother and infant sister.

"None could tell where the physician had gone; but the sudden death of his wife caused suspicion to rest upon him of foul-play, and he had feared detection and fled.

"Herbert Lyndon at once had the bodies of his parents exhumed, and a scientific examination discovered that they had both been poisoned."

"Oh, God, have mercy! have mercy on me!" groaned the old, gray-haired Chief; but after a short pause the Prairie Pilot continued:

"The cause of this double, and intended treble murder, was then evident, for the will of Herbert Lyndon left all of his vast wealth to his wife, and in case of her death, to his children.

"The three children had also inherited a large fortune from their grandfather, and his will was, that, in case of the death of any of the children, those remaining should have the share of the deceased equally divided among them, and that they should claim their fortune, only when the youngest of the children should become of age.

"By his murders, the cruel stepfather hoped to possess the wife's property, and then the wealth of the two children, the boy and the girl, whom he intended to mold to his wishes.

"Fearing punishment for his crimes, the guilty man fled, carrying with him the boy and the girl.

"Infuriated against his stepfather, Herbert Lyndon swore revenge, and commenced to seek the guilty man, to punish him, and gain possession of his brother and sister.

"For two years Herbert Lyndon tracked him from place to place, to at last find that he had been one of a train of emigrants going West, who had all been supposed to be murdered by the Indians.

"Mourning the loss of all he held dear, and tired of a life in the cities, Herbert Lyndon became a prairie-hunter, and for years has passed his life upon the prairies and in the mountains of this far Western country.

"A strange fatality seemed to direct his life in this, for, by so becoming, he found out that the wagon-train, in which were those he sought, and whom he had believed murdered, had fallen, not by the Indians, but by the bold plan of one man, who, with a few desperadoes, had killed all the emigrants and plundered them.

"That man was the stepfather of Herbert Lyndon, and, from the attack on the train, he became an outlaw.

"Locating himself in the mountains, and gathering around him a bold set of renegades, he waged a relentless war for plunder.

"In this outlaw camp he brought up the boy and girl whose parents he had murdered, and if they, under his training, did wrong to many, they cannot be condemned for so doing, for their supposed father led or drove them on.

"Now my story is ended, and in that man you behold the author of all these crimes; in me you see Herbert Lyndon.

"Doctor Roger Radcliff, have I spoken the truth?" and Prairie Pilot laid his hand on that of the old white-haired Chief.

But he started, while a general murmur ran round the room—for Roger Radcliff was dead.

Quietly, with the voice of his accuser ringing in his ears, he had passed from life into eternity.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

IN the little valley, where Prairie Pilot had his home, Roger Radcliff was consigned to his last resting-place, and above his remains was erected by his son, Colonel Radcliff, a white board, with the following simple inscription:

"ROGER RADCLIFF, M. D.
Died September 20th, 1844."

The surprise and delight of Ralph and Ione knew no bounds, at having found a loving brother in the Prairie Pilot; but the maiden had heard all before from the lips of the scout.

Colonel Radcliff, though pained to the heart at the evil course of his father, warmly congratulated Herbert Lyndon, Ralph and Ione,

and again and again begged the scout to forgive and forget the past, adding:

"To atone for my crime toward you, whom my father has so bitterly injured, I give you one whom I love more than all else in the world, for that your hearts are one I well know. Come, Ruth, if Herbert will have you, I give my full consent for you to be his wife."

Herbert Lyndon drew the bushing maiden toward him, while he said, softly:

"You have already promised me, have you not, Ruth?"

"Yes; even when an unknown scout I loved you with my whole heart," was the prompt answer.

Now that Amos Arlington was aware of the strange circumstances that had made Ralph Lyndon an outlaw chief, he gladly forgave him the past, for he knew that the young man would lead a far different life in the future, and the decision of her father rejoiced Ida, for she had never ceased to love her dashing, handsome husband, outlaw though he was.

"There is one little outlaw I would like to trail to the altar," said Bravo Bob, ruefully glancing toward Ione Lyndon, who held down her head, while her elder brother replied:

"Her heart is already in the fetters of love, I am certain, Bob, and I freely give my consent, for you are a noble fellow, and though a little wild once, you have reformed now, and must return to your Kentucky home, and show them what a lovely wife you found on the border—and more! tell them that she is an heiress, for Ione is a very rich young lady, I assure you," and Herbert Lyndon drew his beautiful sister affectionately toward him.

Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave, having been pledged to secrecy regarding all that had transpired, and presented with a handsome present in gold, by their old comrade, the Prairie Pilot, the whole party left the retreat and its strange secret behind them, and set out for the fort, where they fortunately arrived without adventure.

Until the close of the Indian war Colonel Radcliff determined to remain commandant at the Blue Water post, and Prairie Pilot and Bravo Bob would not desert him; but when the hatchet was at last buried, he resigned his commission, and, accompanied by his daughter, Prairie Pilot, Ralph and his lovely bride, Bravo Bob and Ione, he started eastward, Yankee Sam and Scalp-lock Dave escorting the party to the border of civilization, and there bidding them farewell, for they would not give up their life upon the prairies of the West, even to witness the wedded happiness of their old comrade, Herbert Lyndon, once known as the Prairie Pilot.

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